The Garden of Heaven

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/9548438.

Rating:
Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Category:
Gen

Fandom:
Voltron: Legendary Defender

Characters:
Keith (Voltron), Shiro (Voltron), Original Characters, Lance (Voltron), Hunk (Voltron), Pidge | Katie Holt, Allura (Voltron), Coran (Voltron), Original Galran Character(s)

Additional Tags:
Character Study, canon divergence - post season 2, Body Horror, Galra Empire, Drama, Galra Keith (Voltron), Non-Sexual Slavery, Whipping, Corporal Punishment, Physical Disability, Fantastic Racism, Ableism, Ableist Language, Food, Drinking Games, Underage Drinking, Organs, Organ Theft, Abuse, Original Character Death(s), Emetophobia, Suicide, Blood, Alien Biology, Alien Cultural Differences, Propaganda, Mental Health Issues, Mental Breakdown, Beating, Bloodlust, Space Pirates, Gun Violence, Head Injury, Hostage Situations, Derogatory Language, Maiming, Gunshot Wounds, Swordfighting, neck snapping, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Starvation, Broken Bones, Complete

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of The Helvicta Blues

Stats:
Published: 2017-02-02 Completed: 2017-05-20 Words: 108,043
Chapters: 23/23

The Garden of Heaven

by Genesister (papirini)

Summary

From the void of space to the heart of a deeply-buried secret of the Galra Empire, the search for Shiro leads Keith on a voyage that he never expected, wanted - or realized he needed.

Its just a question of whether he can escape, when its all over - or whether he will even want to.

Tags will be added as the work proceeds.

This work is **COMPLETE**. Enjoy!

Hata

Approximately a month had passed since Takashi Shirogane disappeared from the cockpit of the Black Lion.

It had been a time of chasing rumors, of looking for shadows and deciphering insinuations. Days went by for the team without a trace to pounce on, the leads on where their friend and leader might have been drying up like a desert creek. Team Voltron lived on tenterhooks, when they should have been celebrating their victory over Zarkon – a victory that may have even ended with the tyrant's death. Instead, everyone was afraid.

Keith Kogane, Red Paladin of Voltron, was most terrified of all. It fell on his shoulders to lead, and he wondered if he was just leading everyone on a wild goose chase after all, as he leaned against the back of his Lion's cockpit seat.

"All right, we're approaching the Suntala exosphere." His eyes narrowed at the bright orange sphere, its surface dotted with bright blue splotches. "Ship's probably here somewhere."

"Are you sure?" A yawn crackled from the comm and into Keith's ears. "And if you're not sure, can we just get back to the ship?"

"Not until we've completed the sweep of this planet."

"Geez." The yawn turned into a grunt of annoyance. "When Shiro told you that you could be leader if he disappeared, did he also shove a stick up your half-Galra butt?"

"We're not going back," Keith repeated, slowly and deliberately, biting his tongue at the 'half-Galra' comment, "until we're sure the ship we're looking for isn't here."

There was a silence from the Blue Lion at this.

"…I think I liked you better back at the Garrison."

"Shut up." Keith took some breaths to keep himself from shouting at Lance. "Just focus on the objective."

"After this," Hunk's voice popped into the conversation, a quiet worry creeping into his tone. "Whether we find Shiro or not, I vote we go on vacay. Maybe to a beach planet."

“Oh, seconded, man. Definitely seconded. Especially if we can dunk our Fearless Leader into the water.”

On that note, Keith chose to ignore Lance until he sounded like he had something important to say on what was happening. He knew, he knew he was pushing the others hard, but he had no doubt that if the shoe was on the other foot, Shiro wouldn’t stop tearing through entire star systems until his team was reunited. He tore through Zarkon, after all.

So far as they knew, at least. There had been whispers that Zarkon survived. That he was preparing to exact vengeance. The opposite was also murmured – Zarkon was not only dead, but that save for Haggar, there was a leadership gap so great that no one in the universe could be found to fill the emperor’s shoes. All of the information was uncertain. Much like the tip that *maybe* Shiro had been on a large ship in this part of space, a ship that was *maybe* little more than a derelict relic from previous battles, that was allowed to decay in orbit over a planet that *may or may not* still be an operational mining facility for the Galra Empire. A mining facility that no one really had a clue as to what was being extracted from it.

If there was one thing Keith hated, it was uncertainty. He moved to go full throttle.

“Oh, hey, picking up some readings over here! We can go tanning later.” Pidge’s tone was crisp as she flew alongside Keith’s Red Lion. “There’s the shi—“

It broke on the horizon like a monolith. It was a massive monster of a ship, as large as a ship Zarkon would find fit to fly. It was not, however, a purely Galran-made ship, though Keith could spot Galra-engineered parts poking out here and there. Indeed, as it fully broke into view, the craft showed itself as a chimeric anemone, the likes of which none of them, Keith was certain, had ever seen. It was a strange amalgam of parts and sharpness, built piece by piece from other ships of other worlds, other civilizations, even other metals and colors when light reflected on those surfaces.

There was no trail of gas coming from the beast’s exhaust ports. There were no lights present to signal other ships of its present. The sound coming from the thing’s communications channel – if it even had one – was static.

“…Uh.” Hunk broke the silence. “You guys are seeing what I’m seeing,

right?"

"Sure am." Pidge's tone was awestruck. "Holy *quiznak*, it's a literal junk ship. That…is…*amazing*."

"And…" Hunk's voice continued. "I'm not the only one glad we went before we left the Castle, right?"

"*Nope.*" Lance's voice was an octave higher than usual. "So…*glad*!"

"…Red. Get me down there." Before anyone else could speak, Keith cut through the chatter. "I'm boarding."

"Wh—hey!" Keith winced as Pidge shouted. "No way! We haven't even gotten a bead on what we might be facing! Get back here, you-!"

"Ok, that does it!" Lance's Lion roared as it tried to follow. "You're getting sprayed when we get back to the ship. And no milk for a week!"

Keith's response was to go faster. *Anyway*, he thought he saw—ah. An exhaust duct of some kind, one big enough to get his Lion through.

"Uh, hey, Lance?" He heard Hunk quietly crackle in his ears. "Maybe cool it on the space cat jokes? He's clearly getting angrier."

"Yeah, time and place, idiot," Followed by Pidge clearly wishing her smack down was more than verbal. "Now Keith is about to smash his face on the side of Star Ship Junk to spite you!"

"I'm *fine*." At this point Keith's temper was reaching its frayed end. "Just keep an eye out for incoming Galra ships. I'll take the ship interior. Red out."

"Keith—"

He turned his comms of at that point. He was going in, alone.

Keith. If anything should happen to me…

The Red Paladin quietly disembarked from the mouth of his Lion, eyes furrowed. There was a small maintenance door at the end of the shaft,

the security wiring which his Lion had easily disabled with its tail. It made no sound in the vacuum of space, and neither did Keith as he floated to the door, thrusting it open, and positioning himself into the decompression airlock beyond.

The room's lights beeped once the door closed, before allowing atmosphere to enter the room. The Paladin let his breath out; the air was breathable, but had a sharper taste to it than that on the Castle.

…I want you to lead Voltron.

Of course, Keith promised, back when they had been stranded together without any seeming recourse. If anything happened to Shiro, he would step up and take the other's place. He still wasn't entirely sure what Shiro saw in him, but he had vowed to keep his word. He would lead Voltron, now that Shiro was gone.

Lead them to what, Keith could only bitterly ruminate on. Four lions, with no hope of forming Voltron. Constant yelling. Fruitless leads. Day where his team mates chose to avoid the training room, if only to spare themselves their new leader's anger and pushing. Of course he pushed them. They weren't doing enough.

He wasn't doing enough.

Why wasn't he doing enough?

Keith grit his teeth as he pushed the airlock door open, finding himself in an empty corridor. Could anyone blame him, then, for being a little more hair-trigger than normal. That it reminded everyone that one of their own had a little bit of the enemy in him, and was perhaps more liable to snap under the stress. Maybe they were even afraid of him, even though they had claimed to have accepted his heritage, after some time and thought.

He wondered if one day, if things kept on like this, everyone would change their mind right back and leave him alone, as he had been before for so many years.

Not that he cared, of course. Not at that moment. Oh, he should have. Whenever he had cooled off he'd made a vow to apologize or something for his behavior of late. Not yet, though. This was more important. Finding their leader was more important than their personal feelings.

Finding their real leader, because he knew that somewhere, somehow,

Shiro had to still be alive.

~Paladin.~

There was no one in the hall. It was quiet. Too quiet.

~PALADIN.~ The growled voice of his Lion echoed louder in his mind. ***~COMMUNCATOR. NOW.~***

~…Oh.~

He'd almost forgotten he'd turned the comms off. His Lion reminding him meant only one thing: the other Lions had contacted her. Which meant everyone else was probably freaking out about his abrupt cut of communications.

"—WEAR TO GOD!" Keith's comms nearly looped into feedback as Pidge's angry voice screeched to life into his eardrums. "KEITH, IF YOU ARE DEAD *I WILL KILL YOU*!!"

"Keith!?" Hunk's voice was just as panicked. "Keith, this isn't funny, please respond!"

"Ugh, *he's fine*." For once Keith was glad Lance was on his side with—wait. "He's probably just being all edgy and broody and angry, just give him a few more minutes."

"This can't *wait* a few more minutes!" Pidge huffed. "I need to talk to him *yesterday*!"

"…You can stop shouting." Keith kept his voice low. "I can hear you."

Silence.

"*Finally*!" There was relief tinged with annoyance as Pidge spoke again. "Ok, look, my bio-metric readings on the ship just finished. And, wow, the basic schematics of this ship are nuts, they just cobbled together any ship they could find and somehow managed to make it viable in space! This thing might actually be able to fly out of orbit if we let it!"

"That's…nice?"

Keith resisted the urge to snap at Pidge to get to the point and stop waxing poetic. He was close, though. Probably closer than he should have been.

“But, uh, yeah.” There must have been something in his voice which had given some indication of his feelings, since Pidge quickly changed track and cleared her throat. “Anyways? There’s something blocking our ability to properly track your BLIP, and now there’re a lot of dots on my screen. Like, thirty-something on your level alone. At least I think it’s your level, unless you jumped fifty feet just now. And, uh, there’s also something else on my energy scans…”

Keith sucked in a breath. He was going to likely run into some trouble, then.

“I’ll find whatever’s jamming your signals.”

“Keith!”

“If this ship is mapped out as crazy as you say it is, then all four of us are going to have to split up to look for Shiro anyways.” A sputter from Pidge was ignored. “Just tell me if you’ve got an approximate location of the source and I’ll find my way there.”

“You sure about that, man?” Hunk’s voice came through after a moment. “You don’t know what you’re dealing with in there. None of us do. I vote we get back to the Castle and do a scan there.”

“Not sure if that’s the best idea now.”

“Lance?”

“I mean, Fearless Leader’s already on board.” Keith rolled his eyes at the epitaph as Lance continued. “And it doesn’t look like he was spotted yet, right? The only way we know anyone *might* be on there is that our signals are jammed. And if there is anyone else on board, these guys might not even know we’re here. Or, they know we’re here, are trying to pretend they’re not here, and they otherwise don’t know *Keith*’s there.”

“What’re you saying, Blue?”

“I’m saying, Pidge, if we leave now, and Shiro…” Lance trailed off. “We had a lead to this place, right? The most solid one we've had. Our searches haven’t all panned out, but we promised we’d find out what happened to him, no matter where that took us. Maybe this *is* the ship he’s on, and if we retreat, and these guys leave…”

There was silence, at this.

“So we just…leave him there?”

“We give Keith the time to see what he can do about our signals. *Then*, we try boarding too. If he can’t we get out.”

“That’s a thought.” Hey, Lance had his moments, Keith had no problem admitting that, even at that point. “So, Hunk?"

"...All right." He wasn't fully on board, judging by his tone. "But be careful, ok?"

"Pidge?”

“…If this is right…” Pidge paused. “The source of the signal jamming is…where the cargo bay of Super Junk Ship might be.”

“Ok. So bottom levels. Give me twenty minutes. Red ou-”

“Wait!”

“*What?*”

“I need to tell you something else! Guh!”

No. Keith did his best to not explode at Pidge, yet again. They were trying to help.

“What is it?”

“There’s…some really weird energy readings there. I don’t know if its related to the signal jamming, but the readings I can get are really…” He could hear Pidge struggle to try and describe what she was seeing. “Look, just be watch your back, ok? I haven’t seen anything like this before.”

“Yeah, no worries.” Keith nodded. “I will.”

“You better,” Lance quipped. “Or else Pidge really *will* kill you!”

That actually got a small smile out of him, even if no one else was there to see it.

“Fine. Red out.”

Whoever was on the ship – if anyone was on the ship – wasn't taking any chances.

Keith hadn't encountered, much less seen, anyone. No hint of life, despite the obvious atmosphere pumping through the ship. Lights were dimmed to the absolute minimum needed for the sake of sight; every door that could be opened revealed empty rooms, some seemingly not habituated for days. Elevators were disabled. Temperatures were cold and ice was starting to form in a few corners. The ship had gone as dark as it could without outright killing whoever was on it.

Lance seemed to have the right idea, then. No one had come out to challenge Keith. Indeed, no one had come out at all.

Which allowed the echoes of voices down one particular hallway to startle Keith enough to jump backwards.

"…rgo…" Keith quickly found his composure again and ducked behind a door panel, as a reedy voice whispered through the wall. "… no way they could know we're here. They shouldn't even be aware of our existence!"

"Things change, Jabon. Especially nowadays."

Keith's blood chilled at the guttural growl that responded. He knew exactly what that meant. One of them was a Galra.

This ship belonged to the Galra.

Of *course* it did.

"Surely," the reedy voice speaks again, nervously as they start to pass Keith's hiding place. "Once they realize that what they're looking for is gone, that, ah, no one worth finding's here, they'll leave us be. No reason to stay, yes?"

"It wouldn't be a *problem*," The growl deepened. "If this ship weren't full of stupid *skeefs*. Where's the one who made the deal?"

"On ice, sir. You may…ah, do what you will with him."

"And the snitch?"

"Jetted, as per your directive."

"*Good.*" Keith could see the flash of yellow, and the massive physique which accompanied it, as it began to disappear. "Once the coast is clear, we will…he main fl…"

And then they were gone. Keith let out the breath he didn't know he was holding, and bolted in the opposite direction.

Cargo bay. There it was, with five minutes to spare.

Meanwhile, it didn't feel like he'd been on board for only fifteen minutes. Not with all the sweat suddenly forming at his brow.

Keith stared at it, before quietly making his way down the stairs. Here. Here was where the jamming source was. All he had to do was sever the jamming, let his team mates on board, grab Shiro and then haul out. If Shiro was on board.

He'd passed several prisoner cells, the walls still coated with blood. There were no bodies to be found, alive or otherwise.

The cargo doors slid open as Keith descended the last of the stairs, and a powerful, unexpected blast of heat hit his face. The cargo bay was giant, silent, and in the center was a large, black container. It looked like a holding area of some kind. Perhaps, even, for prisoners.

The heat was emanating from it, he realized, as more sweat began to form as he continued forward, closer to the container. Soon enough, he was mere feet away, and he leaned against another, smaller container a few feet away.

"Guys." Finally, Keith turned on his comm and spoke in a whisper, looking to his left. "I'm here. I think I found--"

Three large robotic Gladiators and a large, two-headed alien were staring at him when he turned to his right.

"…Be right back."

"Keith--!?"

His bayard was out and swinging before the first Gladiator could react. Its head rolled on the ground as the other two robots lunged

forward. The two-headed creature let out a shout and ran off as Keith began to parry the blasts from their laser.

A Galra leader, Galra robots…in Keith's mind, there was no doubt. This was a Galra operation of some kind. Not a very well-guarded one, considering the level of the robots. They were barely dodging him, whereas he was easily outclassing them.

"Come on," He teased the last remaining robot, after eviscerating his second opponent. "Is this *seriously* the best you can do without Zarkon around!?"

The robot charged, and Keith's bayard went right through it. It heaved and sparked before falling to him, lifeless. After dislodging his bayard, Keith went back into a stance, looking for the two-headed alien.

No sign of him. He was likely already gone, warning anyone he could fine.

I better hurry.

"Keith!" His comm came back to life again. This time, however, it wasn't any of his team mates speaking, and there was an unusual amount of static. "This is Allura. What are you doing!?"

"Hey." Without any remaining, obvious resistance, Keith began to walk towards the container. "I take it the others didn't tell you what's going on?"

"They did," He could still hear the miffed tone that responded, static or no. "What were you fighting, just now? Do you need back up?"

"No. I got them all." Looking, looking, ah. *Ah.* A shiny button to push. "We might have a fight on our hands when they come aboard, though, if everyone's up to it. One of them ran off."

"…*Keith.*"

"They've powered down almost every non-essential system in here." A hiss came from the inside of the container, and the hatch on the side began to open, as Keith pushed the button. "The team can be on board before…any..."

He trailed off, his eyes widening as another, more powerful blast of heat hit him.

“Keith?” The worry in Allura’s voice increased, as did the static, “Keith, what’s happening?”

The Red Paladin could feel his skin crawl beneath his suit as he beheld what was within the container. He’d know the canisters in front of him from anywhere; he’d tried taking one from the Druids. But what was inside was nothing like the quintessence that had healed his skin. It was hot, it was bright.

It was a bright, navy blue.

“Allura…” Keith couldn’t help but stammer as he walked into the container, sweat was already starting to drip off the edge his chin. “Guys? Team…its quintessence.”

“What!?” Pidge’s voice managed to break through. “These guys have quintessence cargo!?”

“Awesome!” Lance’s ‘woo hoo’ followed it. “Let’s loot it! We could use it for our Lions!”

“No, guys, this…” Keith swallowed hard as he picked up a container. It was hot, almost burning, even with his glove on. “Something’s not right, this quintessence iaa***AAAH***!”

He yelped as, he spotted the laser blast in the corner of his eye from the robot he had decapitated first. After shooting, it gave one final shutter before sputtering and falling to the floor. Keith, for his part, managed to dodge a hit that otherwise would have hit him in the chest.

It shot right through the container in his hands instead, blue liquid running down to his feet. Keith didn’t even have time to toss the container from him before it shattered.

Exploded, throwing blue liquid all over Keith and the surrounding containers.

“Haa--!”

The effect was almost instant, as the strange quintessence proceeded to burn right through the pieces of Keith’s armor that it touched, sinking onto his skin with a hiss. It burned. It hurt.

“***GAH-!!***”

“KEITH!” The static became a great whine as his teammates began to shout. “*KEITH!!*”

“Nuh…!” Keith shut his eyes as he felt his helmet start to crack from the liquid’s presence. “Everyone, th-this…!”

“BLIP is unresponsive!” Allura’s tone became panicked. “Keith, are you all right!?”

I’m fine.

It’s what he constantly said to everyone. His rebuffing of concern had increased significantly since Shiro’s disappearance. Everyone knew he was lying. Keith wasn’t stupid. It was all he could do to keep focused on what needed to be done. That’s what a leader did. Leaders could handle whatever happened, and could recover from their moments of weakness.

But now? Right now, as he felt the overall heat in the container increasing, even as his own skin burned like fire?

He was *so not fine*.

“…No…” His voice shook as he shut his eyes, his breathing fast and shallow. “NO!!”

“Dude, Keith!!” Lance’s voice managed to cut through. “Stay calm, we’re c—m-ng f—“

His helmet emitted a loud crack, and the visor covering Keith’ s face fell out of its nook and crashed to the floor. That was followed by more glass cracking, and Keith whipped his head around in time to see several dozen of the containers closest to him start to shake. All of them had cracks melted into them, courtesy of the quintessence that had exploded from his hands.

Just like that, then, all of them shattered, bathing Keith in blue with such force that it ejected him out of the container entirely. His screams were replaced by gargling as the liquid went right down his throat, in his eyes and up his nose, setting his insides on fire.

No. No. No. NO...

It was all he could think of, before he found himself on the ground in a puddle of blue, the two-headed creature suddenly hovering over him with a large rail gun. His entire body was screaming, and his armor

was cracking all over him.

He was in no condition to fight back.

"…Oh no." Instead of ending him (which, at this very moment, Keith would have shamefully preferred), his opponent simply shrieked threw the gun aside, and ran. "Oh no, *oh* no, *its leaking*!!"

He slammed his hand onto a white button near the cargo bay entrance doors, before fleeing to a cluster of escape pods, several yards from Keith's position.

"**EMERGENCY SCAN COMPLETE. RED ALERT.**" A pleasant-sounding female voice – Altean, somehow from the inflections - accompanied the sudden flashing red lights and blinking emergency strobes. "**RED ALERT. CONTAINMENT BREECH INDICATED. RADIOACTIVITY LEVELS RISING. ONE-DAKİKA SELF-DESTRUCT ACTIVATED. PLEASE HEAD TO ESCAPE PODS IN AN ORDERLY FASHION.**"

Quiznak.

Keith's breathing turned into panicked hyperventilating as he lay in the blue goo, otherwise unmoving. Too much pain. Hard to focus.

This was his fault.

~Paladin.~

This—

~PALADIN!~ Red's roar echoed through his mind. ***~I must get you now! The ship will be destroyed!~***

—his fault.

~…Red.~ He slowly turned to his right. *~…Escape.~*

~Not without you!~

Focus, Keith. Focus. You are a leader now.

He grit his teeth and rolled over. His armor – what was left of it – creaked unstably.

~Escape…pod.~ One, two, three. Up. No. One, two, three, four, fi— up. *~I got this. Come get me…my pod. You or the others. You can come get me.~*

~You are hurt.~ A stinging sensation zipped from the back of his head to the back of his eye as he struggled towards the cluster of escape pods. ***~You will need medicine when you are back with the others.~***

~I know.~ He tried to smile, as he finally staggered into a pod. *~Catch you on the flip side.~*

"**RED ALERT. TWENTY-İKİNCİ WARNING.**"

Keith shakily pressed a button, then slammed his fist into it to seal him in. As he did, his gooped up hands pressed against several inner wires, causing them to hiss and spark.

If I don't get electrocuted—Another sharp pain skittered across his eyes, and his eyesight became dimmed. *Come on, come on…!*

Finally, breathing fluid started to fill the tank.

COME ON!

"**TEN-İKİNCİ WARNING.**"

The fluid was taking far too long. It was only up to his hips and going too slow. He wasn't going to make it.

"*GRRRAH!!*"

Finally, he just ripped the sparking wires out and prayed that did something.

The fluid rushed up to his chest, and he let out a gasp at how cold it was as it seeped into the broken bits of his armor.

"**FIVE, FOUR…**"

Up to his neck.

"**THREE…**"

The escape pod was full of liquid, and Keith began to float inside of it.

"**TWO…**"

He heard a beep, and the next thing he knew the pod – and he inside of it, were being sucked away from the ship.

“ONE…”

The ship’s destruction wasn’t immediately apparent. It wasn’t like in any films, where when you hit a spaceship, it exploded into a great fireball. That was a lie. Space had no oxygen to sustain fire without any kind of magic. Nor was there really any explosion. There was no sound in space.

In the case of the amalgamated ship, nothing seemed to happen for the first few seconds. All the other Paladins would have seen, no doubt, were dozens of escape pods flying out from who knew where on the ship. Then, Red Lion flying around the ship, letting out her roars.

What they would have felt was the shockwave. It came quick and fast, and tossed the Lions – and those with Paladins within them – far and fast from the ship. This seemed to be a part of the design of the ship’s self-destruct, Pidge would later note, as it also tossed every escape pod right out into the void of space or onto the planet below.

There were 183 escape pods that Allura could track back on the Castle of Lions, shooting away from the scene at the speed of sound.

And when the Red Lion could finally be persuaded to come back to the Red Tower, Keith wasn’t inside.

Değişim

~Red!~

As he felt his feet slam into the bottom of the pod from the sudden increase in velocity caused by the shockwave, Keith's focus wasn't on the pain. It wasn't on the strange blue quintessence as it slowly absorbed into his armor, his mouth and eyes, his skin. His focus was on one thing and one thing only.

Escape. Get Red to my location. Get back to the ship.

~RED!~ His psychic screams became louder. *~I'M HERE! I'VE ESCAPED SUNTALA'S ATMOSPHERE! I'M…I'M BEING JETTISONED INTO SPACE! PLEASE…RESPOND!~*

For a moment, he could hear it. Red Lion's roar. But it was too faint, too far away. And then, like a radio switch, it completely clicked off.

The planet shrank more and more as the escape pod careened into deep space. He could see the orange glow disappear into a small blink, with the system's sun slowly following suit. There was no sign of Lions coming after him. No Castle of Lions, in any direction. Nothing but the hazy blue glow of the breathing liquid in his capsule, the few pinpoints of light he could see beyond that, and of course, his own reflection.

His own, terrified reflection.

His Lion wasn't coming to get him this time. *No one* was coming to get him this time.

He was alone.

He tried, of course. Tried to cast his mind again to his Lion. Tried to contact the Castle through his BLIP. Tried everything and anything he could think of, even kicking the bottom of his pod with a yell. As if that would make his pod stop in a space without any gravity to stop its momentum.

Once the sun of Suntala's system completely disappeared from his vision, he stopped and actually looked down to actually assess the damage to his armor and his body. His helmet was cracked in half; the comm system was likely busted. His BLIP was damaged alongside it, if his final transactions with his friends had been true. So, no way for his friends to even contact him, or even find him, if they were trying. Parts of his armor that hadn't been outright burnt up was blackened by the exposure to the strange blue substance.

He'd made a mistake. He knew that now. He'd made a complete and utter mistake boarding that strange ship alone. That had been his undoing. That had been the end of it. Now, no one was going to find him. If it had been Shiro in charge, and not him—

The searing pain behind his eyes returned, and he could feel his eye twitch violently as he looked down at his partly-bare forearm. A good fourth of his suit had been damaged or outright burned by the weird quintessence. That had been frightening enough. The fact that his skin had so easily absorbed all the quintessence that had touched his skin, was even more worrisome.

"…Castle in the blind…" It was weird even using the term. He never thought he'd have to use it, to talk to someone that he knew would be unable to hear him, or respond, even as he desperately *wanted* them to. "I'm leaving the Suntala system…I escaped…I was exposed to quintessence of unknown provenance. I'll update as I, um, can. Red out."

He had to think. Normal quintessence – so far as he understood it – was light blue, even white. The quintessence used by the Galra Druids was usually purple, but before it was refined it could also be yellow, as he also well knew from being splashed by it. He'd never seen quintessence of such a dark blue hue, and while he was no expert on what all the kinds of quintessence that could exist (that was more something that Pidge would look into), the heat, the burning sensation, the way it interacted with the air once it was released, indicated that it wasn't a normal type of energy he'd encountered. Coupled with how that two-headed alien had fled, rather than kill an otherwise helpless opponent, a Paladin of Voltron no less, when he saw the stuff was leaking. And then, that self-destruct alarm...

Had he been poisoned? Is that why he was feeling that pain? Some of it had gotten into his eyes and his mouth. Was that right? Was *he* right? Would his friends be able to help him when - *if* - they found him?

What the quiznak did I get hit with?

He had the feeling the pain was going to persist. He knew that whatever this strange substance was, it was dangerous. It was going to mess with him and it was probably going to get worse before it got better.

The uptick of pain from his eyes to the back of his head, to his inner ear and jaw, still came out of nowhere. It knocked the wind out of him as he felt it, causing him to smack his head on the back of the podcast as he brought his hands up to his temples. Dear God he wished he had some aspirin on him.

"I'm…" Keith shut his eyes involuntary tears streaming down. "R-right, Castle in the blind, I'm starting to develop consistently worse migraines, an—NGH!"

Opening his eyes gave a new pain he hadn't anticipated. Everything dimmed, then sharpened to such a degree that he had to shut his eyes again. Attempting to open them didn't lessen the sharpness. It was as if someone jammed a pair of glasses into his retinas. Nor did it help his headache.

When he finally dared to try opening his eyes again, he immediately shut them when he saw his faint reflection. For that split second, he thought he was going mad.

A pair of eyes, dimly glowing yellow, had been staring back at him.

Something really *was* wrong with his eyes. Those were really *his* eyes. And his ears. His *ears*. He was starting to hear *things*. A strange tum-tum sound in the void that he had never heard before. It took some time to realize he was actually hearing the cycling of the breathing liquid, as the pod used its aeration system to vent out waste into space. Like carbon monoxide, or human waste.

Not that peeing and pooping was a problem anymore, he'd stopped

really defecating some time ago. He hadn't had anything to drink or eat for who knew how long. He could feel himself starving from the inside out, could feel himself hunger for what he had none of. He could feel his body begging for nutrients he couldn't define.

He could feel himself changing. Dying, slowly but surely, along the way. There was very little he could do to deny this.

It could have been getting exposed to that quintessence. It could have been because of the escalating headaches, the breathing fluid of which was not helping him at all. It could been the gnawing pain in his stomach (*when was the last time I ate? How many days?...*). It could have just been that - ironically, all things considered - after hearing nothing but the dim him of his life-support systems, and seeing nothing but the black expanse of space, he was slowly going insane from the isolation. It could have been all of that combined.

So, after some (as in, almost none at all) deliberation on how to keep himself from slipping into a psychotic episode, he made a snap decision. He was going to pretend that his reflection was just a random yellow-eyed person that just happened to look like him, had the same broken armor, and silently mirrored everything he said and did.

"Yo."

His 'guest' just looked back and winced as Keith opened his eyes.

"Has anyone told you it's not polite to stare?"

He was about to shake his head (his 'guest' *had* to be rude, of course) when he felt more sharp pangs emanate from his eardrums into his jaw.

"Ch—" Keith began to grit his teeth. "Castle in the blind, pain's coming back and its spreadinffF***FGHK***!"

He felt the sudden lump in his throat, and he nearly choked on it as he frantically tried to smack his chest – an almost impossible feat with the parts of his armor still covering him. Finally, though, his gag reflex kicked in, and he choked up the responsible lump from his throat.

He let out a strangled choke as he saw the bloody – and fully-intact - tooth he spat out.

After that, the rest of his teeth began to fall out in quick succession. There wasn't much of a rhyme of which teeth went out next – they all came out at random, their blood slowly dispersing into the breathing liquid. Each time he smelled the blood as the pod's aeration systems slowly filtered it out, he felt his gnawing hunger increase, could feel his thoughts cloud with food, and Hunk in the kitchen, and food, and Hunk offering his arm out to Keith to sit down, and *food,* and Hunk's arm were muscular and must have *a lot of meat beneath it—*

No. What?

His thoughts of hunger were dashed, forcibly so by him. Firstly, Hunk wasn't food and he would aim and do well to remember that. Secondly, the blood coming out with his tooth had *stains* congealed within it. Dark blue stains.

Like that quintessence.

He looked up at his reflection, which stared back with its own gaping, toothless mouth open. Stared for who knew how long, before pain suddenly overtook his jaw again.

He let out a strangled cry as he closed his mouth. *What was happening to him?*

Hungry. So…

Keith's swollen hands were shaking as they pressed against the glass. He wasn't looking at his reflection anymore; he didn't want to. He didn't need to. Once he felt the new pain in his jaw, felt what was coming down from his gums, he knew what was happening. His teeth hadn't *just* fallen out for no reason, had they?

They just were making way for something else. So, they had to go. The first things to go, because there was no *way* that could be the end of the agony.

“Ca…” It was hard to talk. His mouth was on fire, and whatever had replaced his teeth made it difficult to speak without cutting his tongue. “Cathle in the blind…my mouf…my teef.”

It hurts. Make it stop.

He didn’t say it out loud. No one would have heard him anyhow. No one would have answered him back. And now his hands. His hands, and feet, the pain was there now, and all he could do was shake as it went right to his bones.

It’s just pain. He wasn’t sure whether he was trying to convince himself, or his reflection, as they floated together. His reflection looked in just as much pain as he did, after all. *Just pain. That’s all.*

Seriously, he could almost hear Lance teasing him. *Get thee to a healing pod, man! You’ll feel better. You—*

Naturally, the response would be to rip his throat out. How dare Lance question him. He was going to be—

No. Quiznak, stop it! He brought his hands to his forehead. *He’s your friend!...*

Friend. That's right. Even when Lance was annoying and trying to one-up him, that was the truth. Not that Keith would have ever admitted it out loud. Still, the more those thoughts came in - thoughts of ripping and tearing and fighting people he had some measure of camaraderie towards - the more terrified he became.

It wasn’t just his body being affected anymore, was it? He could feel his throat tighten as he realized this. The longer this went on, the more and more he—

That was when the pain jerked with up into his fingertips, and he screamed, his voice piercing right into his - increasingly - tonally sensitive ears, as the distal phalanges suddenly shuddered, then began to balloon up. The blood began to pump hard into his hand, turning his digits a dark, deep purple. They swelled, the skin and nail popping out of the cuticle, and just barely holding onto the increasingly enlarged forms. It felt like the very bone was scraping on the inside of his skin, it was tired of waiting, and it wanted out of the stupid balloons on his fingers.

After who knew how many minutes later, the balloons finally popped from the inside, splattering the tube with red blood, all of it tinged

with blue. Keith didn't even bother screaming – the pain was too much – as his stubs of fingers flailed and beat helplessly against the onslaught of nerves and pain *and pain and **more pain***.

More navy blue. There was way more blue in his blood than before. He shook, staring at the floating blue globules that his eyes could now see, before his eyes focused on his hands. The exposed bone – was it elongating? *It had to be the blood loss making him think that* - was dark purple, and the skin still attached was also dark purple from the blood that had fed into it. His heart beat thumped long and loud into his hands, nourishing whatever his hands were becoming.

The sharp ends of the bone looked familiar. Too familiar.

Before Keith could fully connected the dots, pain started all over again. Forcing another gurgled scream from his throat.

It shot all the way down to his feet.

Galra.

The coolness of the glass on his face only made things a little bit better. The breathing liquid was starting to get muddy; it was, at the very least, a sign that the filters were starting to fail. It was never meant to support someone stuck in the pod for a long-term excursion in space.

However long his time out here may have *been*. There was no way to count cycles or figure out days like this. Sleep only came when Keith blacked out from some new, horrible transformation wracking his body, or when he was just too exhausted in general to continue thinking or staying awake. It was also now with increasing difficulty that Keith roused himself from sleep.

It didn't help that he knew what he would wake up to.

I'm…turning into a Galra.

He stared down at his feet, the clawed purple toes sticking out from where they had callously begun to rip through his boots, before he was forced to use his bayard to cut the metal and fabric off to let the

growth happen. He would have used the Blade of Marmora, had he not forgotten it in his haste to investigate the supposed derelict junk ship.

His haste, which was now killing him slowly, *and* worse.

His increasingly hazy reflection carried the same changes he did. He gave up pretending the reflection was someone else.

It didn't help. Nothing was helping. *This was him.*

"Cuh…castle."

His throat was dry despite the breathing liquid. The pain wasn't so bad as before, when it felt like someone had shoved a bottle brush into his mouth and used it to pull and push his vocal cords forward and down. His voice barely sounded like itself.

"In the blind."

He felt his head squirm, and he winced. No, not his head. Just the appendages that burst up through his ears and cracked them apart. He'd blissfully blacked out after that one, too. What was left of his helmet was already askew to allow them movement once he felt it get tight, so that couldn't be the problem.

They were probably shifting upwards again. Ever upwards.

…Wait, what was he just doing. Right. Talking to no one again.

"Its…me," He rasped. "You guys. You know its…still me, right? You *know* me. I'm still…"

His chest suddenly started to feel tight.

"I'm…still…"

He wasn't crying. Even if he wanted to. His chest was truly starting to feel tight. His chest, his armpits, his back, his stomach, his everything. Tight to the point of pain on the inside of his body. Then, he felt the seams of his black under armor – what was left of it – start to rip.

No no no no NO NO—

Then he felt the pain deep down in his spine. First a tingle, then a sharp stabbing. Keith let out a moan as he felt his spinal column shift and twist under his skin, could feel it move around, and then—

He finally screamed as he felt a great snap in his lower back.

He thrashed, he seized, he flopped, and felt another snap, one which was loud enough to echo through the escape pod. Then another. Then another. His back was ripping itself apart, and the pain shot all through his arms and legs and head and neck and throat and then—

He screamed, longer and louder than ever, tears finally falling from his eyes as his ordeal brought him beyond a threshold of anguish. he never thought existed. And he screamed. And *screamed.* And *screamed and screamed and* ***screamed and***

His cries and wails never reached outside of the escape pod. The stars didn't hear him. The void ignored his pleas. His pod simply shot ever onward, its systems slowly failing its changing occupant.

Space gave nothing, and took nothing, from Keith Kogane. Thus, there was no mercy.

No time, no time.

The aeration system had finally failed. There was a single beep below his feet, and then nothing. The breathing liquid had, by that time, become little more than a tube of sludge and Keith knew it was only a matter of time before he breathed his last. There was nothing cleaning the escape pod anymore.

Not that he had ever been clean to begin with, it seemed. He simply stared at nothing, his eyes heavy and glassy, his heart slow, his breaths shallow, his frame dangerously bordering on skeletal. He couldn't see what he looked like, not anymore; there was no reflection in the grime that covered the pod's insides. Nor could he move with the state of his back, and the paralysis which came alongside it. In his state, he didn't care.

All he had left were a few clean breaths before carbon dioxide poisoning set in. After that, it would be a painful waiting game,

unable to stop feeling cold, and yet somehow hot, at the same time as he energy ebbed. At the same time as more terrible thoughts clawed their way into his failing mind.

Would he *still* change, even as he died?

What would happen to his body? Maybe the pod would finally find a planet and burn up in the atmosphere. Maybe he'd just float forever. It didn't matter. Why would it matter? No one he cared about would recognize him. Especially not Shiro, if the team had found him. Shiro, the leader he'd failed. Shiro, who was the enemy of the *thing* he was now turning into.

...What had happened to Sendak, when he had been air locked by Shiro? Had he drifted, like Keith? How long had he drifted, and did he ever wake up to realize that he was in an inescapable death trap? Was death preferable to him? Or would he rather have lived, even if it meant being a prisoner on the Castle of Lions?

Keith didn't know. He'd probably never know anything more, now.

Castle…on…in…the blind.

It was getting dark, and he didn't have the strength to talk.

I'm going to sleep now. I…don't have a choice…

The glow of the liquid was darkening rapidly, as the large shadow began to descend.

Everyone…Shiro…I…failed you. I'm so sorry.

Any moment, now, he was sure of it. He closed his eyes and welcomed the blackness.

Red…out.

And then, at last, Keith knew nothing more.

İrem

Oblivion was so sweet. Keith knew nothing, saw nothing, heard nothing. Felt nothing. Was nothing. It was nice. Good. Maybe it was even what he deserved. Dying over a dumb mistake.

No more changes, either. No more falling teeth or spine-breaking pain. Just floating. Death had its perks, he supposed. At least he was pretty sure he was dead. He wondered if there would be a literal Grim Reaper coming at him, ready to drag him to an afterlife. Normally he'd have considered kicking and screaming to get away from death itself if that was the case, but now? He would have just told it to shut up and just take him to the pearly white gates. Or the horrifying flaming demon gates. Or the…purgatory…not-doing much…limbo gates?

He had a metaphor he was going for, really. He would have absolutely picked himself back up to finish it off properly, too, if he hadn't seen the white light suddenly come into focus.

So. Pearly white gates it was?

…*bil*…

Wait a second.

…*aking.*

Good! Ok, just stand back, gi…e….om…

A strange beeping slowly echoed into his ears, causing him to wince. The floating sensation was dissipating as he felt himself slowly come back around to reality. That was impossible, though, wasn't it? Everything had gone black around him.

Unless.

…*h…ah…*"…*'mon, there w*e go, open up those eyes…"

Heat began to touch his face, odd pulses began to flow throughout his body, and he felt his eyes twitch. No, no, he wanted to be *dead*, leave him alone. Or at least, if he was alive, let him open his eyes to--

"Heart rate is stable." The strange, nasally voice was not anyone remotely Paladin-sounding. "Muscle mass has slightly increased from

time of retrieval. Nutrient levels are finally baseline. Looks like the intravenous feed Ağla helped you make did the trick again."

"It always does," The deeper voice was no one he knew, either. "It's too bad she's not in the Med Bay with us. She'd make these acclimation check-ups so much easier."

"Yeah, but then we wouldn't have Akordeon chop soup!" The nasally voice stopped. "Oh, he's really coming to now!"

Indeed, Keith couldn't keep his eyes closed as the light became a stinging glare, and the strange pulses on his body increased in intensity. They finally, slowly, fluttered opened to the bright white light above, the tug of electrodes on his body causing his fingers and toes to twitch just *so* slightly on the operating table.

"Ah, yes! You have successfully revived him, Teori. Well done, comrade."

Two individuals stared right back down, as the bigger of the two gently pushed the light away. They wore dark gray turtlenecked suits, and both had on surgical masks covering their mouths, and, Keith realized as he squinted, a blue sash somewhere on their body. The bigger of the figures had the blue sash around his neck like a scarf; the smaller, the blue sash was hanging near his hips.

"Hello." Any sense of relief or gratitude he had for these strangers vanished when he saw two pairs of bright yellow scelera – and nothing else – in their eyes. "You were in rough shape. How are you doing now, pal?"

The reaction was instant. Keith bolted right up, letting a gasp as one of the electrodes on his bare chest and arm popped off, landing in his lap.

No.

The grey suits had glowing purple insignias etched into them, in a written language he didn't understand. He didn't need to understand. He'd seen who had worn similar garb before, with extra armor to boot, and gun-blades aplenty. He knew who these creatures, these *saviors* of his, were now.

He had been rescued by members of the Galra Empire military.

NO.

He bent his back, ready to leap off the table and bolt for the door in front of him, electrodes and all. They'd stripped him of all his weapons, his armor, his clothing, save for a pair of white skivvies he didn't recall ever having worn. He didn't care. Modesty was not high on his list. Whatever their plan for him was, he had no intention of letting them execute it.

He would die before that happened.

"Hey, hey, hey!" The bigger Galra's hand pressed gently onto his chest, forcing him back down onto the table before he had a chance to - weakly, unfortunately - fight back. "You're ok, you're safe, pal! Don't panic, we got you, we're just finishing up on checking your vitals."

"…Let me go." Keith's throat was parched, his voice croaking as he tried to push back. "Galra…You're Galra…!"

"Ah, well, duh?" The big guy rolled his eyes, but there was a quiet, reassuring (*was it* though?) grin full of *teeth* on his face as he tugged his mask off. "Of course we are. So are you, now, you know."

"*What*-!?"

That was when he caught his reflection on the metal walls behind the bigger Galra. The skin and fur was more lilac than purple, and his hair was mostly still black save for dark purple spots flecked unevenly through it. But the build, the mere presence of fur, the eyes, the height, the coloring in general. Everything else was…

I'm still me, aren't I?

The words surged back to him, and he let out a gasp as the memories that accompanied his journey also returned. Oh god, he had been turning into a Galra. Now—now, his reflection confirmed it. He *was* a Galra.

He was one of *them* now.

He was instantly thankful, for a moment, that his Marmora keepsake was in his room back on the Castle, lest these boys call him a traitor and slit his throat with it. Only for a moment, however.

"Wow, is he hyperventilating." The smaller boy looked up at the larger. "Shall I sedate?"

"*NO*!"

"...Right then. Please," Keith tried to swat the hands away without success, as they pressed against where his neck met his jaw. "Pulse's a bit high. It seems you are still acclimating to the last of your ordeal, and this could have an effect on your recovery right now. We only wish to help you. Let's sit you up proper this time—"

"I don't *want* your help! Ghhk-!"

Unfortunately, his squirming was very weak, and these Galra were decidedly *not* very weak. They sat him up, and he responded with a hiss.

"Still showing some definite signs of lingering hormonal alterations." The smaller looked worrying at a panel as Keith tried to rip off another electrode from his arm. "Hopefully it will stabilize before he has to start work."

"It means he's still going through a little bit of it." The big Galra nearly missed getting bitten. Hey, the teeth worked as weapons. Any port in a storm, they say. "Yikes, good thing *she's* not here right now, so we don't have to worry about—"

"*What is all that racket!?*"

The big guy didn't have a chance to finish his sentence before the door to the infirmary – that's where he had to be, right? – burst open, revealing a very large, very angry-looking Galra female. Her dark purple hair was done up in a very tight bun, and she wore long boots over her suit, the heels of which she clicked as she ducked under the doorway and snapped to attention, glaring right at Keith.

Even if he'd wanted to bolt, Keith knew he had no way to get past her in his current condition. She was practically built like a tank.

"Oh, Kommissar!" Both Galra that had been…tending to him?...instantly stood up ramrod straight, hands at their sides. The bigger one spoke, letting out a nervous laugh. "You'll be happy to know that the individual we brought on board has almost fully recovered from--"

"*You.*"

Instantly, the woman was inches from his nose, staring right into his eyes as she took a long, deep sniff.

"*Yarıldı,*" she snarled after she breathed back out. "You are a half-

breed.”

“…Yeah?” Keith felt his hairs stand on end as he stared back. Show no fear, stand his ground, even if he sounded like a frog as he pushed the words out of his sore throat and could feel his hands shake from worry and hunger. “How would *yo*u know?”

“I could smell your new scent all the way from my quarters when you were brought on this ship.” The female’s eyes narrowed. "And I know every scent on this ship, *yarıldı*. You can’t fool me. What were you doing in that pod?”

Keith kept his eyes trained on her, regardless of her threatening stance and tone. He wouldn’t let this creature harm him. He even felt himself let out a growl before he could stop it.

"Wait! Just a moment!"

“…*What.*” The woman's eyes narrowed. "Why are you inter*rupt*ing me? I am questioning my prisoner."

“A-Ah, with all due respect, Kommissar!” The smaller Galra male spoke again, still standing straight. “I don't mean to intrude on your authority, but we believe our patient may also be part of the program?”

“Yes, *yes*, that must be true.” The bigger Galra nodded quickly. “The last two that arrived here also arrived discreetly in escape pods. This particular one’s transport must have miscalculated the distance between their ship and our own. That would easily explain his condition when he was brought on board.”

“Oh." The woman's discerning look didn't lessen. "Yes, I suppose you have...a *point*. Well, whelp? What say you?”

“Program?” Keith looked over at the two. “What pr—“

He saw the bigger one’s eyes widen in surprise, and he instantly stopped himself.

“I mean, yeah. I am.” His ear twitched as he spoke. “I’m part of the program. Oops. Sorry, just forgot that from almost...*dying*.”

"Mm? How terrible for you." The response was blunt as the female looked down at him, her tone akin to admonishing a pet that had wet the carpet. "If you're expecting sympathy from me, or think that is an

excuse for your current condition, you *are* gravely mistaken."

Looking annoyed at the idea that someone dare use *death* as a justification of any kind for looking like they'd nearly died, the female – the Kommissar – looked up at the two and clapped.

“Well, Teori, Hemşire? Stop dawdling and hand over his documentation at once!”

“We...couldn’t find it.”

The female’s eyes were right back on Keith. It was like the sun was staring right into his face.

“Act…ually.” His ear twitched again. “I never got any… documentation.”

“*You don’t have any of it!?*” The Kommissar glared harder before throwing her hands up, speaking as if Keith wasn’t right there. “Of course, how *typical* of a half-breed. Probably forgot it all at Processing.” Then, with a mumble. “Probably would trip over his own two feet if someone didn’t hold his paw.”

“I *said* I never got—“

“Don’t you ‘never got’ me, you filthy *yarıldı*!” Instantly Keith’s hackles went right back up as she began to yell in his face. “Processing is done by full-bodied, *full-blooded* Galra and they have *never* made a mistake *once*. Don’t pre*sume* to question those hard workers who *bothered* to give *you* a chance for once in your pointless, *filthy* life. *Is that clear*?”

Keith’s ears rang as she finished her rant. So, this was how it was going to go. He was saved only to be trapped on a Galra ship with a psychotic Galra lady. And she knew he was only part-Galra.

Quiznak.

“Finish your examination, Teori.” Clearly riled up, the Kommissar turned on her heel and marched out. “Once you're finished, you will bring him to me. I’ll Process him manually if I have to.”

Suddenly the company of the two Galra was far more preferable.

As she disappeared, the two males’ postures relaxed. Quietly, the bigger one – Teori, it looked like – placed a clawed hand on Keith’s shoulder.

“Don’t mind the Kommissar.” Keith rolled his shoulder away from the paw, and Teori, for his part, shrugged. “You get used to it. Everyone does.”

“...So, what now?” Keith’s words grit through his teeth. “Am I a prisoner?”

“A prisoner? Even now you think that might be the case?” At this, the other male – Hemşire – just chuckled. “No, no, not a prisoner. None of us are prisoners. We all *chose* to come here, just like you did!”

Keith opened his mouth to say, no, he *didn’t* choose this, this was the *exact opposite* of choosing to be here, he wasn’t one of them and he needed to *leave*. He knew better, though. They thought he was supposed to be here, so he’d need to play along, for now.

I need to get out of here.

“…I’d better hurry and finish up.” Quickly, Teori began to carefully peel off the electrodes – causing Keith to yelp as small bits of fur came off along with it. “Before the Kommissar drags you out of the med bay by your hair!”

He wasn’t dragged out, but once he had finally staggered to his feet, the Kommissar was right outside waiting for him She also still herded him like he’d never learned to walk in basic cardinal directions.

“This way!” Her voice was drill sergeant levels of infuriating, as he was forced to jog down long grey halls lined with glowing purple tubes. “*No*, down *here*! What are you *doing*!? Go to your *left*, you idiot!”

Finally, they came to an elevator, where the Kommissar slammed her hand down on a panel.

“*Really*, I must wonder what Processing was thinking even allowing *you* to leave before they made sure you had everything and your arrival was in order.” With a ding, the elevator opened onto a small grey amphitheater with small seats. “Sit *down*. I’ll start the orientation zoo.”

Keith didn't have to be asked twice to sit, and he did, several rows up to the front. As far from her as possible. As long as she wasn't up his butt, he was fine with that. He heard a panel slide out of the wall, with the Kommissar tapping her claws into it. Whatever a zoo was, he doubted it was for petting, or anything like that.

After a moment, the theater darkened, and a hologram popped to life.

"***Hello!***" A strange, stop motion-esque logo popped up, before an artificial voice began to speak. He had no way of reading it. And how the quiznak was *this* a *zoo*? "***And welcome…half-blood…to the Galra Empire Inclusivity Initiative! As a…half-blood…you will find your new life on the…Galra Empire Star Ship* İrem*…to be more fulfilling than your wildest dreams could have possibly envisioned!***"

The *İrem.* The name meant nothing to Keith, as he watched a holographic animation, of a cute Galra spaceship letting out poofs of smoke across a field of doodled stars, to a strangely chipper tune.

Wait…what? Then it hit him what was being said on the screen in front of him. *'Inclusivity Initiative'? What the--?!*

"***As you are likely aware as a…half-blood…there is a great deal of misinformation about the loyalty of…half-bloods…to our eternal leader, the Great and Holy Zarkon.***" The music changed into something sinister, as the animatronic changed to show an evil-looking figure, waving a laser gun menacingly while shooting at what could only be a Galra soldier. It even ended with a *~dun-dun-dun~* sound effect. "***But by choosing this path, you have forsaken your…inferior, non-Galra heritage and culture…and have dedicated yourself to ensuring the Galra Empire's glory for all races and worlds***!"

Keith stared in surreal horror as the scene and music became happy, and the evil-looking figure poofed into a Galran-eared figure, looking quite happy. He was seriously watching this. He was seriously watching a promotional video that welcomed him, for physically turning into a Galra, even though his problem had nothing to do with…whatever the *quiznak* was being spouted about inclusivity.

That was seriously happening.

Was he sure he wasn't still in the escape pod, slowly dying and losing his mind?

"***Many…half-bloods…have applied to enter this special program for***

many yıl, but very few applicants complete the process and are chosen for assignment on the…Galra Empire Star Ship İrem." The Galra figure is suddenly surrounded by other Galra figures all smiling and hopping up and down. "***Once you begin your perpetual residency, you will find that many other…half-bloods…have been doing what you entered the program to do. Working hard and embracing their… superior Galra heritage…to benefit the Empire's future, for the rest of their lives. As you learn your trades from your fellow…half-bloods…you will no doubt bond with your co-workers, dedicate your life to your work, and further strengthen the power of the Inclusivity Initiative's effect on the universe. And, perhaps soon enough, due to the efforts of you and your fellow…half-bloods…we will finally have universal peace for all. Hail the Holy Zarkon, and enjoy the rest of your life!"***

With that, the movie finished, and Keith's breath hitched. The big and little Galra who had treated him. They hadn't really been threatening towards him. On the contrary, they seemed downright friendly. Sympathetic, even.

Was it actually true? Were they really part-Galra, like himself?

I don't understand...how—

"All right, that's enough." The hologram flickered off, and the Kommissar's voice interrupted. "This way, I'll be doing the encoding. And try to keep up this time?"

With that, it was back on the elevator and onto another floor. It was down another long corridor, again lined with purple tubing. This time, a blast of cold met the two as they turned right and entered a small room. A giant tube was placed in the center, and with the press of a button it opened.

"Get in there." When Keith didn't move fast enough he was pushed in, nearly smashing his face into the glass. "Come on!"

"**SCANNING SUBJECT.**" A quick flash of purple covered his body, and then disappeared. A small, vambrace-shaped nodule popped out of the floor, rising to Keith's height before clicking open. "**SCAN COMPLETE. PLEASE PLACE YOUR FOREARM INTO THE PROFFERED ENCODER.**"

Keith stared at the machine, then frowned. He didn't like the term he was hearing, and he wasn't going to stick his arm where he knew lasers had just been.

“What are you waiting for?! Do as you’re told by the machine!”

He looked up at the Kommissar, who was giving him a death glare. And a headache, for that matter. Hadn’t he distanced himself, after being drummed out of the Garrison, to get *away* from people like her?

“Why?”

“Wh—“ The Kommissar sputtered. “Are you as *stupid* as you look, you mangy whelp?! *Put* your *paw* in the *encoder*.”

“…No.” Keith couldn’t help it. Maybe he’d do what he was told eventually. Seeing this obvious authority figure come mere seconds from exploding in apoplectic rage, as she stepped over to the pod and open it to confront, had to be worth whatever was coming. “Not until you tell me why.”

To be fair to Keith, though, he hadn’t expected that whip to suddenly shoot out from the...wherever it had come from, he didn't actually see where the Kommissar even had a whip...and slam his right forearm into the encoding machine. It sent a shock through him, even as he felt slime come out of the thong.

The vambrace snapped shut tight before Keith could get his forearm out; no amount of pushing or pulling was helping him get any freer. He could now see that the vambrace had a rectangular shape cut out of it on top.

A rectangular shape that a small laser was zooming in on.

“*Hold still.*” Bringing out a strong arm and gritting her teeth, the Kommissar yanked his arm, holding it in a position. “I *swear* to Holy Zarkon I will *break* this arm out of its *socket* if you *don’t stop squirming!*”

“**ENCODING COMMENCED**.”

Keith let out a yelp of pain as he felt the laser etch into his skin, making a very strange *NEEH NEEH NEEEEEEH* sound as it did so. It was like burning-hot needles were scratching against his still-tender skin. Just as soon as it started, however, it was over, and the nodule released his arm.

Keith instantly grabbed his smoking arm before the Kommissar might have a chance, and brought it to his face. Beneath the fur, he could see the swelling red skin surrounding a tattoo. No – he squinted, and

realized in horror – not a tattoo. Lines, with small Galra symbols beneath it.

"**ENCODING COMPLETE.**"

A *barcode*.

"*Better*." The Kommissar was already on her way back to her panel as Keith yanked his hand away. "So tell me, *yarıldı*. What makes up your other, inferior part?"

A low-pitched beep emitted from the Kommissar's panel.

"Hm. The blood and gene type's not registering on our system." She turned on her heel to look at him. "Well? What race did your Galra progenitor *foolishly* decide to get together with?"

Keith let out a *tch* at the question. No way he was telling this woman he was half-human. He wasn't going to inflict that kind of potential future pain on humanity if he could help it. Especially if – and the thought was still taking its time to sink in – he wasn't unique in his heritage, possibly not even on Earth.

He just had to bluff his way through this madness. He could do this.

"Well?" The Kommissar was beginning to lose patience, yet again. "Do I have to force *that* out of you, too!?"

"No. I'm--"

His mind flipped through as many space species as he could remember. Whether it was because he'd met them personally, or because he heard someone speak of them. Several dozen came to the forefront instantly.

His ear twitched as he decided on a winner.

"Drule. I'm part-Drule."

"Part-*Drule*?" The Kommissar didn't seem entirely convinced as she pressed a button. "Well, well. It appears we don't have Drulean DNA on file. We'll make sure we keep this for any future members of your type."

Ah. He let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. *I am so sorry, everyone who is Drule.*

“Oh. Right. Your name.” His breath caught again. “What is it?”

“Ke—“

NO!

He nearly tripped up there.

“—lllick?”

His ear twitched again. This was *awful.*

“…*Click*?” The Kommissar repeated the name incredulously, before she - maybe? He couldn’t tell with the glow – rolled her eyes. “*Nuh*, the Druleans really *do* have puerile minds. What would a Galra even *see* in one of your kind…”

Her hands flew across the panel.

“Well, not that it matters. That’s not your name anymore.”

“Huh?”

“Hmm, yes, it’s decided. Your new name is Kılıç.” The panel beeped. “A better, *Galra* name.”

“…Don’t I have a say—“

“*No*.” The response was blunt. “Your name is *Kılıç* from now on. You are not to use your original name - or any variations or nicknames or *puns* or portmanteaus of it – from now on. Have I made myself *clear*?”

Keith resisted the urge to growl as he stared at the back of the Galra enforcer’s head. His name. Even if he’d given a false name that wasn’t even a real name to begin with, the idea that someone could just change someone’s name like that – no discussion, no appeal, no way to stop it - made the pit of his stomach boil in its own acid.

The Kommissar could choke on “Kılıç” for all he cared. His real name was all he had of his right now, in this place that made no sense. He would hang onto it no matter what this witch ordered. Even if it could only exist within his own mind, he would only give up being Keith Kogane when the name was pried out of his cold, dead, decomposing brain.

“*Yes*,” he slowly spat out. “Crystal clear.”

"*Good.*" With that, the Kommissar marched out. "Now get out of there. It's time to make you look decent."

'Decent' meant throwing a grey suit, with a glowing purple insignia on it, at his head, along with a blue sash, and telling him he had five *dakika* (the *quiznak* did that even mean!?) to put it on in one of the lavatories. Well, if he learned one new thing today, it was that Galra had to go to the bathroom on occasion, too, he supposed.

And he wasn't alone in being part-Galra, *apparently*.

He stared at himself through glowing eyes in the mirrors – or whatever the reflective glass was called by these creatures – while he was in the lavatory. Having gotten that quick look in the med bay had at least prepared him for what he'd see up close. He was definitely lilac under the fur, similar to Ulaz, or at the very least some light purple like it. Not that his fur was long – he could see that stupid barcode under it on his wrists – but it was *fur* nevertheless. His ears were large and black like most of his hair, curling gently towards the back of his head; also like his hair, the insides were splotched with uneven purple.

Looking down at his feet as he went to pull his leggings on, he noticed small, peach-colored pads on the instep, as well as a pad for each toe.

Toe beans. He moaned as he realized exactly what they were. And he had a tail; a tiny and pointy one that he could feel thrash wildly as he bent over. *Of course* he had a tail and toe beans. *Why wouldn't he*.

What surprised him more (and embarrassed him less) than the toe beans was the realization that there was still a measure of *human* in his looks, aside from his hair color. He had lines and freckled fur under his eyes that were peach, and some of his longer, antennae-like eyebrow hairs were peach as well. His palms were still bright and peachy, palmar creases present, only melting into purple on the fingers and claws of his hands. Of course there was also the bottoms of the feet, with the stupid peach toe beans, which didn't turn purple until his ankles. He could almost pass as a taller, half-starved, grumpier-looking version of himself with Galra bits, he realized.

Almost.

He could almost imagine his friends' reactions to seeing him like this. After they put their weapons down stopped trying to kill him, because he doubted they would just accept that he was Keith Kogane without *some* measure of proof. Hopefully opening his mouth and talking would suffice.

OH MY GOD! SOFT!! Hunk petting him between his ears like he was a petulant house cat. *I BET YOU PURR, TOO! EEEEEEEEEEEEHEHEHEHEEEE~!*

Heheheheheheheh. Lance taking out a giant book scribbled with notes as Keith glared back. *Oh man, you have no idea how many space cat puns I have been waiting to use on you!!*

Now. Him backing away as Pidge turned on a giant drill. *I'm going to start the incision at the base of your brain. Stop screaming, I've cut steak before, what's the difference?!*

Oh, you're…! Allura staring at him, an annoyed pout on her lips, a hand on her head and her cheeks puffed out, as he doubled over in pain over his stomach. *Ah,* quiznak*! Sorry, I keep forgetting you're not an intruder!*

Personally, Coran twirled his mustache as he looked Keith over. *I see absolutely no difference whatsoever! I do not know why everyone else is panicking.*

And Shiro—

Shiro had airlocked the last Galra who wasn't immediately known to be an ally. Shiro had lost control several times, when confronted by the Galra or the fragments of his past. The look on his face, whenever anyone had seen that happen…

Keith clenched a fist.

"***TWO-DAKIKA WARNING!***" He let out a hiss as the Kommissar's voice echoed into the bathroom. "Hurry *up*, Kılıç!"

It wasn't just because of the noise smashing into his ears, either. He'd clenched a little too tight, and his index claw had nicked the inside of his palm. He instantly brought his hand up to suck on the blood, but froze when he saw the color.

His blood, save for traces of red here and there, was a deep navy blue.

Just like--!

The Kommissar continued to push and pull him around the ship, yelling at him, telling him to hurt up, and generally just being a big nuisance to him. He managed to throw his clothes on before the two minutes were up, at least. Not that it seemed to raise his star with the woman.

“You are to wear your sash at all times. Failing to do so will result in immediate punishment.”

Not that he cared, since he intended to escape from this place.

“Wake up is at 0500 of *sabah*, morning muster is at 0510 at the starboard bow, you will be fed between 0600-0615, then you will go to your assigned work area for the *gün*. We begin at 0630 of *sabah* and end at 1800 of *aksah*, with the evening muster at 1810 at the starboard bow. High sup is from 1830-1910, and it is lights out at 2000 of *aksah*. *No exceptions.*”

Even if it apparently held people like him. This stuff was pointless.

“You will have free time at the end of the *gün* to use the recreation rooms.” The Kommissar’s eyes turned and glared at him. “You are *not* to engage in *any* intimate touchy-feely conduct with *any* other individual on this ship. We have enough of you *yarıldı* running around as it is.”

This treatment wasn’t worth the hassle.

“Here are the living quarters.” A door panel slid open to reveal a long wall of capsules stacked in twos, with various Galra figures entering them. “You will bed here, and *nowhere* else on the ship. Your capsule number is 49.”

Keith’s eyes widened. The beds were literally just capsules with slabs thinner than a futon, that slid in and out of them through the push of a button. Each was covered with a single sheet and a small pillow. Those on higher levels had tiny rungs embedded onto the side with which to try and climb up. There was otherwise no rooms, no other furniture, other than the capsule enclosing.

This was even worse than the Garrison's bunking.

Wait. Why were people already—

"***FIVE DAKİKA TO LIGHTS OUT!***" The Kommissar practically shouted in his ears, which immediately folded flat. "***IN BED, ALL OF YOU!*** Any caught out *will be punished*!"

Letting out a throated growl, Keith almost stomped over to his little lower-level cubby, pressing the button on the outside and watching the slab slide out. He hopped on it, surprised at how well it held his weight. It must have been made of a material that would handle the weight, though he had no clue whic—

"***THREE DAKİKA***!" *Ugh*. "That includes *you*, Dansçı, stop jumping around on your tip toes like a sissy *ninny*!"

He let the slab put him into the small, dark capsule, head first; as he was brought forward, he noticed two small buttons near the end, where his head was to rest. One was red, one blue. When he was close enough to push them, he did.

"***ONE DAKİKA***, GO G—"

He pressed the red button first. A panel slid over the opening of his box, plunging him into darkness, and the screaming outside was muffled to near-silence.

Excellent.

He was barely tired. He laid down and stared at the ceiling that was mere inches from his face. It didn't matter if he'd gone through a change and became Galra. He had a great deal of energy. He could get out.

I have to get out.

His adrenaline, however, waned after a while. Everything was finally starting to overwhelm him. He felt his eyes grow heavy.

I…have to get out.

His eyes closed, despite his attempts to fight it.

I…have to…

Escape would have to wait until tomorrow.

Vardiya

Chapter Notes

> I am looking for a beta to look over my chapters. If you are interested, please contact my via the e-mail in my profile.

He dreamed. For the first time in who knew how many weeks, he dreamed.

He was in a field, laying down, staring at the sky. The wispy clouds above twirled and whirled in a repeating pattern, and his own body felt light as air watching it.

"Keith."

He knew that voice. He tried to turn and face the one speaking, roll over and look up. He couldn't. He tried to move. Nothing save for flailing arms and legs.

"Shiro!?"

For a moment, he thought he saw his silhouette. He thought he saw the others further back, their forms much hazier. They seemed to be closing in on his location, and he began to sit up, anticipating their arrival. At last.

No matter what he did, though, he remained stuck. It was when he opened his mouth again that he suddenly felt the cold dirt of the ground start to cover him. He gasped for breath as sediment and grass began to fill his lungs.

"Shiro! SHIRO!!" He held his arm out in vain. "GUYS!! PLEASE--*!"*

*****BEEEEEEEEP** **BEEEEEEEEPP*****

The alarm jerked him out of sleep, and Keith found himself face down on his pillow, his sheet haphazardly tangled around him. The beeping continued, as the panel covering his capsule slid open.

"**GOOD MORNING.**" A loud automated voice echoed through the hallway, as the sound of skittering feet accompanied it. "**PLEASE PROCEED TO THE DECK 2 BOW FOR MORNING MUSTER.**"

Keith let out an annoyed growl as he flopped back down in his bed. Ugh, he wanted to stay, he was too tired for this ridiculousness. He wanted to sleep and just not bother with whatever was going on. Then

he remembered the Kommissar, and he let out a sigh.

He might as well play along for the moment, if only to not have to worry about her screaming in his face again.

Quietly, he pressed the blue button, the button not pushed from last night, to see if it would do what he suspected it would. His suspicions were confirmed when his sleeping slab glided out of the capsule, allowing him to slide off it and onto the floor.

“Morning, Kılıç!”

Keith’s head whipped around to see a very tall Galra female smiling at him. Tall and almost noodle-thin, her coloring closer to blue than purple.

“Wh—“ He stared at her. “How did you—“

“Welcome to the ship. Bye, Kılıç!”

And then she was gone, rushing to the elevator.

What the quiznak—

“Hey, Kılıç!”

“Over here, Kılıç!”

“Come on, Kılıç, we’re waiting for you!”

How do these people already know that name!?

The next thing Keith knew, he’d found himself squeezed inside an elevator with two-dozen Galra or Galra-looking individuals, his own body pressed against the rightmost corner and his tail uncomfortably smushed into the wall. As the elevator got going, a catchy tune that felt absolutely inappropriate for the situation began to play on the speakers.

“Hmm hmm!” Near the front, a pair of pigtails began to bounce absent-mindedly, in a slow, strangely undulating movement, like the currents of a slow stream. “Mmm mmm…”

“You know this one, Dansçı?”

“Oh, *yes*.” Dansçı. That had been a name mentioned by the Kommissar last night. “I performed this one during the 10,113th Annual Imperial

Birth Festival, with my partner. The last festival I performed, actually…when I also performed the Lions' Dance…"

There was a short silence.

"Ah…" The voice belonging to Dansçı became soft. "So beautiful…if only you were all there…even if it wasn't...*perfect*..."

"Yeah, too bad for *us*." There was a mumble that seemed to make everyone freeze in place. "Not like you actually shut *up* about—"

The elevator opened with a ding, and everyone filed out into a single line. Keith looked over as he quietly jogged into place, making some mental notes. Such as, for example, the fact that the pig-tailed Dansçı had a purple sash on, as opposed to the blue sash, tied around her waist somehow.

Actually, he realized as he looked down the line, there were a few other purple sashes here and there in the sea of blue. He had no idea what it meant.

"***HAZIROL!***"

And instantly everyone stood straight and tall as they could, and Keith realized he should probably follow suit. He felt the lump in his throat as the Kommissar appeared, flanked by two more traditionally-clad Galra guards, hands behind her back, pacing in front of the group. She was silent for what feels like two eternal minutes, before she finally spoke.

"…Pathetic." Why wouldn't that be among the first five words out of her mouth in the morning. As opposed to *vrepit sa*. "We, the right arm of the great Admiral Otac, empowered by the merciful hand of the great Galra Empire—"

As merciful as a thousand cattle prods, Keith thought bitterly.

"—help you *yarıldı* to uncover your Galra selves and you *sakatladı* to otherwise put your inferior bodies and minds to good use." '*Sakatladı*'? What— "We feed you. We clothe you. We give you jobs. We give you something to *live* for. And how do you repay us!?"

Turning on her heels with a click, the Kommissar glared down at the several dozen before her.

"We don't meet *quotas*!" She began to shout. "We don't *ship out* on

time! We don't *follow proper uniform protocols*! **WHERE IS YOUR *SASH*!!?**"

Screaming at a shorter Galra in the line-up.

"I-I…It got burned up in the***GAH***!"

The unfortunate was grabbed and practically thrown into the guards. As he sailed, and the guards caught him, Keith noticed that he was missing an arm.

"***YOU WILL,***" She shrilled as the unfortunate was led away. "***WEAR YOUR SASHES AT ALL TIMES!!*** How many times must I *repeat* myself!? How many times do you *ingrates* want to *beg* for punishment before you *get* it!?"

As the guards skittered off with their prisoner, Keith watched as one of them subtly pat him on the back. Almost…comforting? *Huh*?

"After this *gün*, anyone who is caught without their sashes will be given *double* the lashes for the infraction!" There were a few hisses in the crowd that were instantly silenced when the Kommissar's heels clapped together, front and center. "That is all. You are *dismissed*."

At least he didn't seem to be alone in his increasingly murderous hatred of this woman, Keith mused. Still no *vrepit sa.* Odd.

"Hey! Kılıç! Newbie!" He suddenly felt someone pushing him. "Come on, job assignments!"

Indeed, the group had crowded around a large holographic panel on the wall, which flickered on after a few seconds. The chatter which the posting generated was instant.

"Oh yeah! Galley and Kitchen duty under Ağla!"

"The Gun Assembly again…"

"Oh, *god*, I'm on Smelting."

"All right, I'm on Medical!"

"Teori, why are you surprised? You're always on Medical."

"Yo, Kılıç." Suddenly, a half-dozen sets of glowing yellow eyes were on him. "Aren't you going to look and see where you're assigned?"

Keith felt the skin under his fur get clammy.

“Oh, I…” His ear twitched. “I was going to figure out where I was after everyone els—“

“*Liiiiar.*”

The word is whispered, and several of those looking at Keith looked over at the noodle-esque Galra, who’d first hailed him that morning. Then, they turned back to him.

“Oh? *Really?*”

“Um…” *Stop…looking at me…* “I’ll just…go look at my assignment then…”

No way he was telling these guys he planned on bolting then and there to look for a way off the ship. As he did approach the list, however, he stopped.

The eyes all kept on him.

“I…” Keith realized he had a very serious problem on his hands as he stared at the nonsense scribbled on the hologram. “I can’t read.”

A ripple of relief went through the crowd behind him. Wait, relief?

“Oh, you just mean you’re blind and the Kommissar never bothered to check when she--”

“*No,* I’m not—“ Keith bit his lip. *Why* were these people being so accepting and sympathetic and *nice* to him!? “I mean…I don’t know how to read this script. No one…taught me?”

A silence.

“Weird,” demurred the noodle. “Processing is usually really good with script conversion lessons, all things considered.”

“Newbie.” A claw shot straight past him, tapping on a line. “You’re on Gun Assembly with *me*.”

Keith turned to look at the owner of said claw. He was about Keith’s size, maybe a little shorter; he had with dark purple hair in sideburns and a slight snaggle tooth on the right side. He, at least to Keith, looked like a miniature version of Thace, albeit with an overbite and large bat-ears.

He was more than aware that the other, who looked at him, was sizing him up just as much as Keith was sizing the boy up.

“I’m training you. They call me Oğul.” The other’s head motioned away from the panel. “Follow me. Food first, then work.”

It was in the elevator, and down another hallway, after finding himself in the Mess Hall. He hadn’t eaten anything. Looking at everyone scarfing and slurping their food down, he didn’t want to eat anything. He didn’t want to eat like a Galra, like everyone else in this place seemed to be ok with doing, as they salivated and slurped their rations.

As Keith was brought to his 'assignment' afterwards, however, he noticed something odd about the paneling of the hallway he was ushered down. Though they still had the light grey and purple tubing as with the other areas he had visited, though it was still quite straight, as he got closer to his destination, he noticed that some of the walls and panels didn’t quite match with the colors. Some of them seemed to be haphazardly fastened on, as if those parts of the ship were built in haste and with whatever had been lying around the nearest space junkyard. Several pieces looked older and stood out more than others. Other parts of the workmanship didn’t even remotely look like the work or technology of the Galra.

Seeing the usual Galra engineering marred this way gave Keith a somewhat uneasy feeling. The feeling was only increased when he realized that, thus far, there had been no windows anywhere on the ship. No way to figure out their location in space; no way to even hazard a guess. It even, at some points, looked like some of the haphazard additions to the ship may have been to cover over any windows that may have been there previously.

Did…they Scotch tape this ship together or something? A pair of large – very much not Galra-made – doors slid open. *It’s like the Galra didn’t bother to—oh.*

The large, light grey room he was brought into had nearly several dozen small modules, all of them fastened to the wall. In the center of the room was a waist-high, massive, open top container, filled to the brim with metal parts and pieces of various sizes. The sounds of

clicking filled the air as those seated proceeded to work.

“Welcome to Gun Assembly.” Keith swallowed the newest lump in his throat as the Galra – Oğul, apparently – spoke. “Here we assemble weapons, guns, gun-blades and swords, to supply the Empire’s troops.”

Quiznak.

“The GESS *İrem* makes their own unique line of weapons for the military braches. This—” waving his hand to the pile of metal “–is the amount we’re expected to assemble by the end of a given *hafta*. Someone with sufficient experience could make over several hundred a *gün* by hand if they did nothing else during that time. Like me.”

I’m really *being forced to make* weapons *for these people?!*

“Over here.” Oğul ushered Keith over to an empty module before he could protest, grabbing some gun parts on the way. “I’ll show you how it’s done. Watch carefully, because I’m not going to show you again. Here.”

The moment Oğul began to assemble the weapon off the module’s desk, Keith was already lost. He could almost feel his eyes glaze over as the Galra’s hand flew over the parts, revealing a fully-assembled weapon within two minutes.

“That’s the basics. If it needs a blade, that’s attached last-” Oğul turned to face Keith. “Hey, are you paying attention?”

“…Oh, yeah.” Keith’s ear twitched. “Absolutely.”

“Well, then.” With that, Oğul stood up and backed away, motioning for Keith to sit. “Have it your way. Don’t try and junk anything if you screw up. And definitely don't try and hide any finished weapons on you. Its a punishable violation, and the Kommissar *will* punish you.”

“*Hmph.*”

Keith sat down, cracking his knuckles as he proceeded to work on his first gun. His hands fumbled a bit, spreading the gun pieces around, with the intent that he could see exactly which pieces were what. His teacher had just gone too fast for him and his new Galra eyes, much as he hated to admit it.

“Hurry up, Kılıç!” Oğul’s voice punctured Keith’s thoughts. “You don’t have time to fool around. Just put it together!”

“Yeah, yeah, no problem.” The guy was already getting on Keith’s nerves. “I *got* this.”

Keith proceeded to build. It was just a gun with the ability to put a space bayonet on it. It wasn’t rocket science. Even the most inexperienced cadet at the Garrison had a basic idea of gun assembly, if only because the generals involved with the curriculum insisted on the lessons, alongside others. Naturally, Keith excelled at those classes.

“You forgot the sight. Disassemble it and try again.”

Keith snorted, then tried again.

“Nope. Forgot the quint cartridge. Do it again.”

Disassemble, reassemble.

“The barrel’s on backwards. Again!”

Keith’s sharpened teeth began to ground.

“Do *you* use an upside-down trigger?”

Oğul was getting annoying.

“Did you *already* forget the quint cartridge? Again!”

Really, *really* annoying.

“Sights, Kılıç, the weapon needs *sights*.”

Keith’s hands began to shake.

“What are you doing, the muzzle brake—”

“SHUT *UP*!”

Before Keith even realized what he was doing, he was up on his feet and swinging. Oğul staggered back and fell to the floor, his claws to his mouth.

The noise of industry instantly stopped. Glowing eyes turned to face the two, as Keith stared down at his opponent. On his part, the Galra launched himself up, then rubbed the edge of his mouth before looking down at his paws. Keith’s eyes trailed to the claws and started.

“You’re not bad.” Oğul’s two foreclaws were splotched with blood -

blue blood - and he gave Keith a dangerous grin tinged with those navy blue streaks. “Not bad at all, for a newbie.”

He was lightning fast after that, his own fist scissoring up to hit Keith in the chest and taking advantage of the other’s surprise. As Keith staggered back, his opponent moved in for the kill; the kill was blocked by an elbow which nearly hit Oğul in the eye. He followed it up by a roundhouse kick, then another punch. Then another. Then another kick. Each hit felt increasingly thrilling, increasingly correct, and it only made him want to hit and tear this Galra a new one even more. He could feel the *want* in his gut, could feel his heart pump, his veins surge with anticipation. And then--

Then he was promptly grabbed from behind by a pair of arms, just as he was about to throw the next punch.

“*Enough!*” Keith gave a wild, drooling snarl as the guard’s arms wrapped around his chest. “You proved your point, newcomer, let it go!”

“Let..me…” He kept fighting, hissing and clawing. “*Go*!”

That only got him in a tighter lock.

“*Calm down.*” This time the guard was hissing in his ear. “Just because you’re a half-breed who can look like us, doesn’t mean you can be an *animal.* Let it *go*, newcomer, before the Kommissar arrives.”

An animal.

Keith’s eyes widened, feeling whatever desire he had to rip out Oğul’s throat slip right out of him. His body sagged in the guard’s arms, as he looked down at the floor, letting out heavy breaths. Once it seemed he’d calmed down, the guard let him go.

What did I just…!?

Over simple instructions. On his *first day*. He was already losing it.

Oğul, for his part, creaked his neck back and forth as he jumped out of the grip of his own guard. The hungry gleam in his own eyes had faded, but not gone entirely, as he wiped the blood off his face.

“I—“

Before Keith could even form an apology in his mind, Oğul had turned

and walked off, leaving him alone with his growing horror as everyone else slowly returned to work.

Twelve hours – or whatever the Galra might have referred to them as – had never felt so long.

"***HAZIROL!***"

It really did feel like, to Keith at least, that his work shift had been twice as long. It could have been that he wasn't used to the work, or it could have been the fact he hadn't eaten anything that morning. Had refused to, actually Not that he'd allow himself to think the latter. He wasn't going to cow to the situation like everyone else clearly had.

He nearly collapsed into muster as the Kommissar began screaming right at him.

"So, I heard it on good authority that *one* of you started a fight on Gun Assembly and put us *more* behind schedule on our manufacture quotas." Her stare went right into him as she paced. "Of course, you *know* who you are. I want to say I expected more control from you, but *that* would be a *lie*!"

He could feel the stares on him, could feel his own cheeks flush in anger. Fear.

"Speaking of *failures*!" She turned her attention to others, including a larger Galra who gave a grunt under her glare. "For someone who used to be *so smart*, it's really *telling* that all you can think about is your sister! As if *you* have any say in where she *goes* and what we have her *do*! And as for *you*?" Who was she looking at? Was it Oğul? "*YOU*!? You had one job and you *mucked it up, as* ***usual***!!"

Shut up. Keith shut his eyes. *Shut up. Shut up…!*

"I would say have a good evening, but none of you deserve it. *None* of you!" The Kommissar turned away from the line. "Get out of here and stuff your *faces* like the savage little *nobodies* you are! ***DISMISSED!!***"

Face still hot, Keith kept his head down as he watched everyone start

to leave. Slowly, he followed suit, filing last into the elevator. When he looked up, he saw Oğul staring at him; his own eyes instantly went back down.

Once everyone filtered out and dragged themselves into the Mess Hall, Keith glanced over at Oğul once more. They were still *staring* at him. Keith flashed a warning snarl at him, before he went and sat down at a table, still refusing to go up to get food, and took several deep breaths.

He just had to get through this meal. Then he would figure out how to get off this ship.

“Aren’t you eating? You ought to, you know.”

At this, Keith slowly looked up. The Galra female with pigtails from the elevator was sitting right across from him, a smile on her face and a bowl in front of her. In truth, to Keith, looking at her from the front she looked much more Galra than he did. More feline, certainly, with almond-shaped eyes to accentuate her thin, grape-purple face.

“Hello,” her voice was very soft and sweet, almost melodic, like a running brook. “Kılıç. Yes? That's your name.”

“Mmph.”

Keith’s response was to hunch over. Maybe she’d get the hint.

“You know, I saw the fight this morning.” Well, he was wrong. “I couldn’t help myself but to come tell you what I thought. Your movements were *marvelous*.”

“Uh.” *Why is she staring at me? What is she* doing*!?* “Thanks?”

“Then again, the first real bloodlust is *always* a beautiful moment for someone of half-blood.” The female seemed to ignore his words, instead gently clasping her spindly fingers together. “You can tell when it’s the first. There’s no control, little logic. It’s really…art in motion.”

Then she *smiled* at him, her eyes staring into his as his head bolted up, and Keith felt his skin crawl that much more. Something about the way she spoke to him was incredibly unnerving. The way she *looked* at him? It was like being ripped open and having his insides being poked. There was far too much intent in those glowing orbs than just a passing compliment.

As if nearly tearing another person apart like an animal could be *complimented*. He brought his head down, but he could tell it was too late.

"...Ah, well." He could feel her fingers come close to his face, yet just far enough away that she could easily with draw them when he tried to wave them off. "You really *are* quite interesting. I'm certain of that much. Your eyes tell me everything I need to know."

At this, she stood right back up from the table, revealing how the purple sash was wrappedaround her muscular waist. It's tails we're perfectly tied into a large bow with no loose ends, like one found on a present.

"I hope I may see *more* of your work, dear Kılıç, as you stay on the *İrem* and earn your keep. Perhaps we'll speak more later. Good *gün* to you."

With that, she stood up and quietly pirouetted away, the contents of her bowl swishing gently and yet never spilling.

...Yeah.

Every new person he was meeting was making it more and more easy to settle on his decision to leave. Meeting that unsettling lady just cinched it for him.

So he waited, waited with hands clasped together until his knuckles turned grey from the pressure, until these insane people and their insane blue blood began to fill out of the Mess Hall. He wasn't like these creatures. He didn't want to be like these creatures. He wasn't some half-breed to be bossed around, to be humiliated, to be forced into giving into his baser nature. He wasn't supposed to look or act like a Galra.

He wasn't supposed to *be here*.

Yeah. I can do this.

He allowed himself to trail behind the group; once a large enough chunk had turned a corner, he stayed. Instead, he doubled back and went the other direction, leaning against the wall until he came upon another haphazard piece of paneling seemingly stuck over the wall. He quietly touched it, then started when he saw that the panel slid open like a door, allowing him to slip into a small alcove before it slid back into place.

Huh. This works.

He would wait, and then he would bolt. He would be off of this ship and away from this whole mess. No matter what happened to him afterwards - whether or not he got back to the Castle right away after - he had to try.

Anything was better than being *here*.

Teşebbüs

Keith stayed in the alcove for some time. He wasn't sure of the time. It didn't matter. All he knew was that he had to wait for the right moment, until he was clear. Until he could make his move, until he was able to look for his escape.

Or, maybe biding his time was a bad idea, the more he pondered it. Questions he hadn't bothered to entertain started popping up. Such as, say, how he was going to escape when he knew exactly diddly *squat* about the ship save for the spots he'd been shown? For all he knew, the escape pods on the ship were all in the Kommissar's room, and he didn't even know where that was. And if that was the case, what would he do *the*n?

No. Don't think, just go. He stopped himself from further questioning his life choices. *I'm the Red Paladin. I'm the acting leader of Voltron. I freed the Red Lion from the very grasp of the Galra Empire. I faced Zarkon, one-on-one. I can escape one measly spaceship!*

Steeling himself, he allowed the panel to open, leaning out to make sure there were no stragglers – or guards - to catch him in the act. To his satisfaction, he found neither. Just to be safe, of course, he hugged the wall as he slowly made his way down the deck.

Ok. Let's see what's down this way.

He continued to press himself against the wall, looking left and right as he did so. He knew about the elevator, which was closer to the bow, and so he kept himself going the opposite direction. There could be another elevator, leading to other parts of the ship not yet seen. There could be a doorway to the escape pods here. There could be the entire ship's contingency of guards around the corner. Anything was possible.

Looking further, he saw there was a small flight of stairs he had to go down to proceed with his plans to go further in. It wouldn't have been such an amazing or weird sight in any way, if the stairs weren't made of something like concrete. Wait. What?

He stared at them, not sure what to think of what he was looking at, before bending down and touching it. Then, more confused, he rapped a knuckle on it. Concrete – or whatever reasonable equivalent this happened to be - was the absolute last thing he expected on a Galra

ship. Or any ship in space, for that matter. But poking it resulted in his mind registering a cold, stone-like substance. Like concrete.

Who makes ship parts out of concrete*?*

Or rather, he had to wonder, what kind of *Galra* did? They had technology that far surpassed anything on Earth, and-

Keith instantly stopped poking as a loud creaking sound suddenly echoed through the hallway, his fur standing up on end. He looked left, then right, his fur puffing up as he slowly – very slowly – descended the small stairway. The creaking slowly turned into a whine, which whistled up into silence after a long minute. It was followed up by another, deeper creaking, like footsteps on wood.

Someone was coming. No, *no*, it had to be some kind of venting system making the noise. It had to be his hearing, heightened by his transformation, letting him hear so much and yet so little at the same time. The creaking was wracking through one of the glowing purple pipes on the other side of the hall. At least there were no guards to run into, so far. The guards seemed to be absent from this part of the floor.

Actually, Keith realized as he finished descending the stairs and looked towards...well, what he hoped was the stern...the guards seemed to be absent from this deck altogether.

There had been a few sentries sprinkled in during the musters, like those who had taken that unfortunate out of the line-up. He remembered seeing them. Of course, there had also been guards to break up his attempt at beating the daylights out of that Oğul kid. (*He's probably the same age as me, or whatever. I don't care.*) He hadn't seen any present otherwise. Not when he woke up, not when he'd been shoved to and fro by the Kommissar, not during meals, not in the capsule barracks. The more he pondered it, the more he realized that the amount of guards he'd seen had been less than what he could count on *one* hand.

It was very unsettling when Keith found himself wondering why there was so little security on this ship, especially since this was apparently a vessel that manufactured vital arms for, of all people, the *Galra Empire*. Why were there not dozens of guards patrolling the area?

Taking a deep breath, he continued forth, doing his best to feel through the disorienting variety of styles in floor and walls that were beginning to confuse his sense of location - this...this was a Galra ship,

right? - and several very abrupt turns in the otherwise straight hallway. He even found himself stumbling back up a flight of stairs, which were again concrete-like.

So, not even the deck layouts were being consistent for him, he realized as he thought back. The floor with the assembling room? The floor where he was attacked by the laser on his wrist? The floor with the weird movie theater? Straight as arrows. *This* floor? Zig-zags. It was like a dyslexic had seized control of designing the ship. And, unlike those floors, it went on, and on, and *on*.

Finally, his eye caught another large, obviously non-Galra-made panel. A *door*-sized panel. Maybe there was another hiding spot. Maybe it was even an entrance to an airlock room. He could only hope. So, after checking to make sure no guards were about to suddenly pop up and surprise him - and nearly jumping out of his pants when he heard more strained creaking noises from within the walls, which died down almost immediately after - Keith finally strolled over and went to open it. It slid open, nice and easy.

And the female noodle Galra who had hailed him that very morning looked right up at him, a holographic projector in her hands, within the very large, bright green room within. She gave him a genuinely surprised smile.

“Oh! Hello, K1-“

SLAM.

Quiznak!

Keith’s heartbeat, already racing from the creaking, flipped up to overdrive as he ran to distance himself from that panel. He couldn’t rely on the panels to hide himself after all, and he certainly couldn’t rely on any Galra that were in them to help him. It was only a matter of time before the noodle reported him out like this, anyhow. Why *she* was out and hiding didn't matter.

He needed to hurry. He needed—

Elevator!

So there *was* another lift closer to the stern. Or what he hoped was the stern of the ship. The layout of the ship was making his eyes cross. He pressed the downwards section of the operating panel, on the obvious assumption that the elevators worked just like they did everywhere in

the universe. Unless they were installed upside down or sideways on this side of the ship, which wouldn't have surprised him if this floor was any indication.

He heard the whirring of the lift from a distant deck, just as he simultaneously heard *footsteps* start to echo in the hallway. They sure weren't his.

The noodle he'd run off on?

The Kommissar's?

Or someone else's?

It didn't matter. He mashed the panel several more times, like doing so would make it go faster. He wasn't dumb. He knew it wouldn't.

But sometimes it was nice to have that wishful thinking. Especially with the footfall coming closer.

Come on, come on…!!

Finally, it came, sliding open to reveal a thankfully-empty elevator. He didn't even wait for it to open all the way; he dove in.

The footsteps were practically right next to the elevator. They started to quicken the pace once the elevator doors started to close.

No no no no no no—!!

Keith mashed a part of the panel on the inside of the elevator - any part - to close the doors faster. He could see the shadow descend into his view, large and intimidating, and it was all he could do to not lunge at the origin and knock it out. But it was coming fast. Too fast, now.

He saw the giant, meaty paw finally come into view.

"Hey! Hold the—!"

The elevator closed just before the paw could grab on and activate any motion sensor to keep it open. Keith let out the breath he was holding, the pounding heartbeat emanating into his ears and making them twitch with each contraction of his chest.

Close. Too close.

Were they onto him already? Had the noodle spoken to a guard? No, no, they couldn't know where he was *now*, right? Not so soon. He had to believe they didn't know.

He took in deep breaths to calm his mind and heart, trying to figure out what to even push. He still didn't know what any of the Galra symbols meant, what deck was what, whether floors were even called decks by Galra. He closed his eyes, before pressing a random part of the panel.

He felt the elevator slide downward. Right. Something to escape with would be in a cargo or holding area of some kind. Good. The doors slid open after a few seconds, and he took a step out.

Heh…heh…heh…

Keith let out a hiss. Someone was nearby, their words whispering into his ears. They were right next to him. Weren't they?

Heeheehee!

Or he was losing his mind. His second step out the elevator was faster. He turned to the left. No one was there.

Shhh. The voices persisted. *Be quiet. They'll hear you.*

No good. Not that way. He went to the right.

…At last…

Keith's hands began to shake as his pace quickened. Even as he walked from the elevator, however, the sounds became more pronounced.

I have you…someone like me…!

Voices were everywhere, emanating from within the walls around him, driving right into his cat-like ears. Who did they have? *Him?* No, he wasn't them, and he was nothing like them—

My turn.

Keith's hands went to his ears, and he shut his eyes. It didn't help. He wasn't going mad. He couldn't.

They couldn't have him.

“Shut…shut up…!”

He wouldn’t *let* them have him.

Let’s go. Let’s go let’s go le—

“***SHUT UP!***”

Keith’s abrupt screech, ringing through the halls all around him, brought the voices to a halt. He let out a shaky breath, letting the silence sink in. That was right. He wasn't losing his mind, and he wasn't going to before he got off this forsaken ship. Never. He was never going to let that happen.

…Who said that—

And then it was back. Keith’s eyes bugged out as he let out a cry, turned and just—ran. He didn’t know which way he was going. He didn’t care. He was wrong. He going insane from the noise, and he needed out *right now*.

Get out. His head flew left and right as he ran, his feet pounding on the floors. He could still hear voices, faint, dizzying, *saying things. Must get out. Must get out. Must must MUST—*

Then he spotted it. A door. A *real* door to open, not just a panel. He threw caution to the wind and slammed his hand down on the panel, watching it slide open.

It was a room. It was bare, save for several hoses on the left side of the walls, wheel grooves and harnesses on the right side, and a single, large shadow in the center. It looked like someone – some*thing* - sitting in a futuristic, floating chair, lifted off the ground by unknown means. Near the trunk of the neck was a large black hole.

Instantly the chair turned around, and Keith found himself staggering back. Whatever was in the chair had the fur of a Galra, clinging to parts of its skeletal, gnarled hands and arms, its frame swimming in the parts of the suit covering it. It had Galra eyes – one bulged out with its cheek, as if it was going to pop right out of the socket. It even had Galra ears – the only thing normal in its appearance. Its head lolled to the right, as it stared *right at him*.

Before Keith had a chance to scream, the thing let out a terrible, toothless, drooling *screech* and jerked back its head. It kept screeching, even as Keith leaped back and began to ran, its cry at a pitch so

perfectly high and *dreadful* it popped his eardrums several times over.

Oh my god. Oh my god. Keith turned to run. His senses were overloaded, he couldn't handle this, he couldn't *handle* this, *why* was he not *handling* this like he should, he was supposed to be the one Shiro *trusted* to *lead*. *Oh my—*

He ran right into a metal breastplate with glowing purple lines.

"*You!*" Keith went to jump back, only to find his elbows locked from behind. "Kommissar, we've found a curfew infraction!"

He struggled and fought as best as he could. Kicked, wriggled, gnashed his teeth. The best he could to was managed to get an arm free, before it was caught again almost instantly. Soon enough, his struggles got to the point where he was hit right at the base of his neck with the butt of a gun, causing him to go limp.

"Stop *struggling*, whelp!"

He didn't black out, though, not fully. He was cognizant to know he was being dragged on his feet, first on the elevator, then down yet another hallway. More panels. More wrong non-Galra colors. Another twisting turn and up a set of stairs.

"*Come* on, this way!"

Into a room, with dark blue paneling. Another room that looked nothing like what the Galra would make, save for the bright metal manacles on the wall. Keith attempted to struggle again when he saw them, but the guards were more than ready for it, slamming him against the wall and locked in the manacles onto his neck, his wrists and his ankles. Keith's nose was pressed against the walls as he was shackled, and when the guards let him go, he found himself unable to turn, his eyes unable to see anything but dark blue.

"Curfew violator is secure. He's ready for your presence." Keith hissed when he felt the back of his suit pulled down to expose his back and arms, all the way down to his violently-shaking tail, followed by a pat on the shoulder. "Just cooperate with this, ok? Don't make this any harder on yourself, pup."

Some comfort, Keith bitterly bared his teeth as the guards left. *You're lucky I didn't rip your throat out…!*

"Kılıç."

Thoughts of homicide on the guards vanished, replaced by thoughts of homicide – and fear – towards the origin of the voice which spoke. On her part, Keith could hear the Kommissar's heels slowly click on the ground, pacing back and forth behind him.

"I see you *already* forgot the rules of this ship, by which you were *told* to abide by." The heels stopped, before coming closer to Keith. "Unless you really are *just* that stupid and didn't understand the *words* coming out of my mouth."

He felt cold, almost wet claws press and squeeze the scruff of his neck hard and tight. Keith could feel his limbs shake beyond his control, then go numb. What was she doing?

"Get off my—"

"*Shut up.*" She shoved him forward at the neck, causing his forehead to smack the wall. "*I* am in charge here. *I* will give the orders. You *will* learn to respect my authority, sooner or later."

Her heels backed up.

"Now."

A squishing noise, followed by a whistling sound.

"*Yarıldı.*"

Then, with the sound of what could only be the cracking popper of a whipping implement connecting to his skin, was *pain.*

Right at the base of his neck, an electric current shot through Keith, up and through his limbs, receptors suddenly lighting on fire. The crack of the whip's attack echoed through his ears, and he almost thought he could feel slime trickle down his back.

"***GHRAAH—***!"

"You *will* tell me," He heard the whistling sound start up once more. "Why you broke curfew!"

It hit again, and this time, Keith's scream came through grit teeth.

“What you were doing *intruding* on the *navigators* quarters during their *rest* period!”

Naviga—another searing hit to the neck.

“You *WILL* TELL ME!”

Yet again. This time, Keith screamed with an angry, inhuman yowl.

“***NNNNNAAAARGHNO!***”

He wasn’t telling her *anything*. He’d never give in to this horrible woman. No matter how many times she decided to whip him.

“…’*No*’.” The Kommissar repeated the word in disgust. “’*No*’, you say?”

That apparently accorded two more hard hits with the slimy electric whip implement she was apparently using. He felt drool pool on the sides of his mouth from the seizures that were beginning to come with each successive hit to his back and especially his neck area. Whatever she was doing, she knew exactly where to hit. Still, he wasn't going to cave.

“You *only* make this more *difficult* for yourself, *yarıldı*!” And then another lash. “So tell me what I want to know *NOW*, before I decide to make this *WORSE* for you!”

“***NNNN!***” Keith was starting to not feel his paws at all, even as his body seized ever more violently from the electricity running through it. “Go…t-take a long walk…o-off…a short pier i-nto...a-a...deep *trench*...!”

This awarded him a hard yank on his hair, pulling his head back as far as his neck would let it without snapping it off entirely. At the edge of his field of vision, he could see the seething, snarling teeth of his tormentor.

“A pier...a trench. A *water trench*. *Ocean*. *Oh*, you think you’re *funny*, huh?!” His head was slammed forward even harder into the wall. “Going to make *water* jokes at my *expense*, are we!?”

Keith would have wondered why *that* earned him a hit to the wall, as opposed to his refusal to talk; technically, what he said wasn't really a water joke so much as a tell off. Unfortunately, he was seeing stars from the head trauma and pain made it impossible to have many deep

thoughts.

“You!” The electric hits began again, harder and more rapid than before, and this time, Keith couldn’t find the breath to scream. “***ARE! NOT!! FUNNY!!! YOU—!!***”

More lashes. More hair-pulling. Whatever tears Keith’s eyes had started to cry from what was happening was simply water, more *water*, and seeing them only seemed to make the Kommissar even angrier. Those eyes began to roll into the back of his head, after who knew how long. He could no longer feel his limbs, and the creeping sense of paralysis was only spreading to his back. The last thing he could recall before blacking out was feeling a slap to his face, the barest hint of cold slime on his cheek.

Not that he cared if he died defying this whole, horrible ordeal. Death seemed a better option, at that point.

The first sensation Keith felt upon coming to was his feet being dragged across the floor once more. Then, pain that knocked the wind out of him, and angry words being spoken by the Kommissar that his brain couldn’t connect synapses to understand.

Then his eyes adjusted, and he saw he was being dragged back to the capsule room.

“…cky.” With one hand, the Kommissar lifted him up high. Several capsule compartments opened up, several pairs of yellow eyes staring wide from the darkness at his battered body. “A r…nder of…happe… breaki…the rules. And if *you* even *dare* to try again…!”

Then he vaulted forward, her paw casually tossing him right into his capsule like a towel on a rack. Once more, his head hit a wall, causing him to sputter blood and saliva and whatever other warm substances could come from his Galra-fied mouth and throat.

“Just *see* what happens. ***GOOD NIGHT!***”

His capsule door snapped shut behind him.

Keith gasped for breath as he stared at the wall, each ounce of air

setting his back and body on fire. He couldn't feel his arms or legs; the wretched blue blood trickled down his head and into his eyes; lines of saliva dripped down from the sides of his mouth. Stinging pain came from his chin, from puncture wounds he couldn't see but knew were there.

All this, and he knew they would expect him to work tomorrow. They would no doubt make sure he was there. Dozens of yellow eyes, like his, from Galra bodies, like his. Half-breeds, like him.

He wasn't strong enough for this.

He closed his eyes, letting the parts he could still feel shudder from emotion, and he finally let out a defeated sob. No one could see him cry in here. No one would care.

Some leader I'm turning out to be.

Naturally, he didn't sleep. Keith didn't want or care to sleep. What would sleep do? It wouldn't take him out of the ship. It wouldn't stop his injuries, wouldn't take them away. It wouldn't change the eternal wait until the inevitable morning came, when he would have to go through the day all over again.

It wouldn't change him back from being a Galra. It wouldn't change that he was a failure, whether it was leading Voltron or just not crying.

It wouldn't change *anything*.

He didn't know how long he'd been laying down before he heard the capsule panel – the only thing that protected him from the disgusting atmosphere outside – slide open. Keith's eyes widened, and he let out a hiss; it was all he could do as he felt his sleeping slab being pulled out into the open.

"Morning."

The word was a whisper, and Keith's ears pressed down flat. The voice sounded familiar, but he was in no mood to talk, or have someone talk

to him.

“Oh my.” Another voice, nasally even in whispers. That one, he definitely remembered. “The Kommissar certainly did a number, didn’t she? You’re lucky you can’t see this.”

Keith let out a pained growl.

“Go away.”

“Not so fast, pal.” Teori. That was the big guy’s name. What was he doing? Why were they speaking so low? Wait, what time *was* it? “The Kommissar got you pretty bad, and that’s where I come in. You’ve clearly got some bad paralysis and the open wounds are starting to change color from the neurotoxin as well."

Wait..neurotoxin!?

Something brain-related. Something that could kill very quickly, and very messily. The Kommissar used it on *him*. Keith went to try and turn his head, but even if he had been able to move much, the nasally Galra held his face firmly in place, pulling the bottom of his hair up from his neck.

“Like I said, you’re lucky you can’t see.” Keith’s growls were ignored. “Ok, you’re good to go, Teori.”

“Right.” The sound of a cap clicking around a canister, before the tell-tale *pop* of the canister being fully opened. “This will hurt for a second, but it’ll be worth it.”

The first sensation Keith when he felt the strange concoction on his back was cold like cream, followed by overwhelming pain shooting from every nerve in his spinal cord. He let out a pained yowl, his body seizing up, before suddenly feeling numb again.

“You should start feeling better in a couple moments, once the neurotoxin starts to cleanse out of your system.” Keith could tell Teori was ignoring the hissing and flailing that was coming out of him. “In a couple of *saat* you should be fine. Scarred from neck to tail, from the looks of it, but fine. After all, nothing beats good ol’ quintessence, diluted or not.”

Huh?

“You’re,” Keith rasped, “using *quintessence*? How? I thought only

druids and...and ships, and...and Zarkon...?"

"…How else are we using it? From the can?" There was a soft round of chuckles from his…helpers? Doctors? He wasn't sure. "Seriously, its just the all-purpose grade stuff the regular military uses. Don't worry about it, no one's going to personally come from CCS to punish us for using this stuff. We have our ways. Everyone on the *İrem* does."

"Yeah, you look like we stole this from Holy Zarkon himself. Rather surprising, honestly, that you don't know about how we work here. But you'll figure it out in time." The nasally one – what was his name? Keith forgot – drew in a breath. "So, have you learned your lesson about trying to escape?"

Keith blanched at the question, then hissed as more of the quintessence goo was applied to his neck. He could feel the large hands kneading the solution into his skin, gently but firmly.

"I wasn't—"

"Psh, don't even try," Teori interjected. "Seriously, almost everyone figured you'd try to escape. Maybe not *this* quickly – we were thinking you'd go a *hafta* - but *no* one's surprised that you tried."

"Of course I—*NNGH*—tried." The pain wasn't as sharp, this time, as Teori applied a third coat on his wounds. "I can't stay here forever. I don't belong here."

"Ah, yes, we can understand how you feel. We all told ourselves that in the beginning. Well, most of us blue sashes, at least." The nasal voiced Galra finally let his face go. "Then we learned our lesson. In the end? No one's ever escaped the *İrem* since it first left space dock. Trust us, you're not the first to try. Won't be the last, either. None of us have succeeded. Its best you not attempt it again, if only for the sake of your back."

"…Maybe I'm different."

There is another round of chuckles at this, because why wouldn't they laugh at him. It was, however, slightly less jovial. The cream-goo-quintessence-whatever application was also paused, if only for a moment.

"Oh, Kılıç." Teori's voice was soft, a hint of sympathy creeping in. "Even if you *did* escape, where would you *go*?"

Keith opened his mouth to respond, but found himself unable to reply before Teori continued his application of the strange concoction. After several moments of silence ensued, before the small, nasally Galra spoke.

“That looks like enough. Should give his body enough time to acclimate and heal before muster.” There was a tap on the side of his capsule. “We should get back to our beds, too. Long *gün* tomorrow, too.”

“Right.” Keith felt his slab being pushed back into his capsule chamber. “Next time you break curfew, you should try to be a bit more subtle about it. Anyways, better get some sleep, and maybe *eat* during mealtimes, ok? That will help, you know. Have a good night, Kılıç.”

“Night, Kılıç. Feel better!”

With that, his capsule’s opening was snapped shut, and Keith was left to his confused and confusing thoughts about what just happened. They knew. They knew he’d escaped planned to escape, the entire time. Yet, not once did they try to stop him.

Where would you go?

Keith stared at the wall again, feeling the pain in his neck and back start to wash away. Really, he could start to *feel* again, and so he could feel his whole body start to go warm as it responded to the quintessence continuing its work on his wounds.

Even if you did…escape…

The warmth, return of sensation, it was making him tired. Keith wanted to think about what just happened, but he felt real exhaustion start to overcome him. His last thought, before he finally drifted off, was a question of just what the heck else had been in that diluted quintessence to make him drift off so easily.

Mutfak

Chapter Notes

Oh my. My finger slipped.

He was in the kitchen of the Castle of Lions. He looked at the bowl of space goo in front of him, as the colors slowly swirled around the edges. The air was chilled, and the lights were dim.

When did he make this bowl? He was pretty hungry, yah, but he didn't remember making himself goo, much less coming from his room and into the kitchen. He tried to get up. Found himself sitting down. Tried again to get up, but no matter what he did, no matter how he fought the compulsion, he just kept sitting down.

As he bent down to take his food, he heard footsteps.

"Hello?" He heard a fluttering sound to his side, and he quickly looked. No one was there. "Guys? Hunk? That you?"

There was no response. He could see, if he squinted, that someone had been in the room recently, just before him. Cabinets were still swinging, still open. He could feel like he was being watched.

"Lance. This isn't funny."

He frowned as he still received no, then went to try and eat. Nothing came up with his spoon. He tried to scoop the goo again, but no matter how he tried, nothing came up. Which sucked, because he was hungry.

Then he spotted Allura entering the kitchen.

"Allura? Where is everyone…?"

She didn't respond. Her back was firmly turned towards him as she stood at the other end of the table, arms crossed.

"Allura?"

She walked off without a word, and suddenly, Keith felt his stomach drop as the ground gave out underneath him. His chair flipped awat from under him, and Keith was sucked into blackness, gasping for air. Further and further away from the kitchen he went, deeper and deeper into the vacuum of space, his breaths coming faster and shorter with every precious second.

Still she walked away from him without a word, leaving him to his fate.

"ALLURA—"

BEEEEEEEEP** **BEEEEEEEEPP

The alarm jerked him out of sleep, and Keith found himself face down on his pillow, his sheet haphazardly tangled around him. The beeping continued, as the panel covering his capsule slid open.

"**GOOD MORNING.**" A loud automated voice echoed through the hallway, as the sound of skittering feet accompanied it. "**PLEASE PROCEED TO THE DECK 2 BOW FOR MORNING MUSTER.**"

Calm. Keith shut his eyes again and let out a small breath, then a longer breath, to try and recover his rhythm. He'd been hyperventilating with his face down, hadn't he? Stay calm. *You're going to get out of this and it will be fine.*

"Where would you go?"

…Home. Keith groaned, as he slid out of his capsule. He felt exhausted. Had he actually *slept*? *I'd go home*.

Would you? Would you really?

I would…

Keith ignored the salutations of his fake name and dragged himself onto the elevator with the others. Under sagged eyes, he could feel the looks occasionally come on him from bright yellow eyes. He knew exactly why they were looking at him. What they felt towards him.

Sympathy. Pity. He hated it.

I'm not one of you! He wanted to scream right in their faces. *I'm Keith Kogane, I'm the enemy of your Empire, and I'm going to get out of here!*

"Even if you could escape…where would you go?"

Keith shut his eyes, clenching his fist. Never mind that he could feel his paws, much less clench them into fists, since last night. He *could* go home, couldn't he? Even if he somehow couldn't find a way off the ship. He knew his friends. They knew how he'd never given up on Shiro. His friends wouldn't have given up on him, either, whether or not they found out he had the physical capacity of a full Galra now.

Right?

How many days had it been since he'd been blasted out of the orbit of Suntala? How many days had he been stuck in that pod, forced to watch himself transform into the enemy? What if they believed him to be dead, after they searched and found nothing?

If they had given up on him – if they thought him dead - would he really blame them? *Could* he?

And then, even if they *did* find him…was there even a guarantee they would be safe around him?

He felt himself shudder as he remembered his fight with Oğul. He'd felt so *good*. He'd wanted to rip the other apart.

"Hey, you ok?"

He didn't know who said it. He didn't care. He kept his head down.

"I'm *fine*," he mumbled, his ear twitching.

"Maybe eat *during mealtimes?"*

He certainly felt better from the quintessence substance Teori applied to him, but a side effect was apparently a great deal of hunger. It certainly had nothing to do with the fact that he hadn't eaten yesterday. Or...hadn't eaten for who knew how long beforehand. He certainly wasn't going to eat to make him feel better about the Kommissar's zoning in on his transgressions the previous evening.

("*Incompetent!* Stupid*! Children! Who try to escape!!* **WILL BE PUNISHED***!!*" If Keith thought he could get away with punching the smug indignation on the Kommissar's face while she screamed in his face, he so, *so* would. "*I* hope *I made myself* clear *to you idiot* yarıldı *last night who* might *have considered doing it!!*")

Once they were released for food, and he wandered into the Mess Hall, he looked around for where the food was being served. Ultimately, he was directed by a guard to a cove in the left corner of massive room, revealing what looked like a blue automat, with each slot labeled by name. He found the one labeled *KILIÇ* and opened it,

his meal popping out on a transparent blue food tray with plates and bowl covered, along with alien utensils and a tulip-shaped cup.

As he picked up his food up and turned towards the tables, he spotted a purple automat in a corner on the opposite side of the room. He frowned, as he noticed that those few walking around with purple sashes were carrying a larger transparent purple tray, with more food items and a larger cup, than those with blue sashes were. Not *much* more, but enough that he could notice even from a distance.

Huffing, he slowly meandered his way to an empty spot, as away from the group as remotely possible, and began to open the tops off his food. It wasn't much at all. The main "course", if it could be called that, was a sausage of…some kind. A small, squat red dog, along with a small, circular piece of a polenta-like substance no bigger than a quarter, a single green yolk with the whites shaped into a flower, all served on a small transparent plate. In the small transparent soup bowl next to it was a dark red soup, piping hot. Keith stared at his plate as he brought the small, black tea-like drink, steaming in the small, tulip-shaped transparent glass.

This was what Galra ate? It looked…like something Hunk might make, just tinier? *Huh?*

"Hey," he heard whispers, even though he was sure he was far enough away that no one would bother him. "Look! The newcomer's eating!"

"What? He's finally *eating*??"

Glowing eyes were suddenly all on him, and Keith felt his cheeks flush. Could they just *not*!?

"So, he's not going to starve himself to death…"

"Thank goodness."

"Hey, hey, Kılıç!" Keith brought a hand to his temple as the chirping continued. "Try the soup first!"

"Shhh, *Mimar*, we're *scaring* him."

"I don't care, he needs to try the soooooouuuup!"

Keith slowly picked up a utensil and stuck it into the sausage. It made a little squish as he proceeded to pick it up and stare at it. Rolling it over to look over every angle. Finally, he took a small nibble.

He wasn't expecting the spiciness, and he let out a cough. Once the spiciness ebbed, however, he could taste the meat. It was like a spicier, saltier pepperoni. He took another, bigger bite. Then another.

The next thing he knew, he'd eaten the entire sausage. It was just too small.

"He likes it."

"Ağla will be really happy!"

"We should probably eat our own food too? Before we run out of time."

"Nah, this is fun to watch! Baby's first meal…"

Keith threw a glare at the direction of that last quip, as he proceeded to the egg and, well 'bread'. It tasted like…egg and bread. Slightly drier, but still egg and bread. Then he proceeded to the soup.

The soup. Keith's eyes widened, even dilated, as he took his first slurping bite. He could feel his tail puff out and shake as the ingredients went down his gullet with a single swallow. This soup was…

"He's doing it! *He's eating the soup*!"

"Oh *wow*, look at his face!"

"He has seen Holy Zarkon in the light of a thousand suns."

How could Galra soup in a military hack taste like *that*?

With his hunger still unsatisfied, and now having tasted such strange but amazing manna, Keith couldn't stop himself. He forsook the utensils and just started gulping down and slurping the soup straight from the bowl. Within moments, the soup was gone, but Keith found himself licking the insides of the bowl with his tongue. It was too good, too good, and wasting such *food* when there was *so little* of it—

…*Oh.*

He stopped, his tongue midway to a particularly long line of un-eaten broth stuck to the side of the bowl, and looked around with wide eyes. Was everyone still watching him. Yes, they were. Why *wouldn't* they be looking at him?

They looked happy. Almost *delighted*, with nary a mocking countenance among them.

Slowly, Keith slowly set his bowl down, frowning, and cleared his throat before grabbing his drink and downing it in a single gulp, without a hint of enjoyment. Yes, the soup was…amazing. And the drink was…creamy for a tea and it wasn't bad either. Actually, it accented the soup's taste incredibly well, leaving a lingering tingle in his mouth and throat.

But he didn't need to finish his food *that* badly. These people…these Galra, half- or otherwise…he didn't need to impress them. He wasn't there for them.

They weren't his friends, and as far as he was concerned, they never would be.

Smelting. With Mess Duty in the evening. No recreation time for him before curfew.

That was apparently what he was on. Him, with one other Galra in each position. The eyes looked at him with some measure of sympathy. It was *really* getting annoying.

"Don't worry, Kılıç!" Someone tried to comfort him with a pat on his arm; he didn't bother to notice who. "The Kommissar *always* punishes attempted escape with that work. You'll get through it. Everyone does!"

Some comfort. He'd have rather actually *escaped.*

Keith steeled himself with several breaths as the elevator went down, with him alone on it. He had an idea what smelting was. It involved making metals, and that meant using giant furnaces of some kind. Which somehow didn't make sense on a ship, with what he knew about furnaces and steelmaking. Then again, apparently this ship, with its ridiculous patterns and mishmash of internal workings, could *totally* them with no problem.

It was backbreaking work, whatever it was going to be. Work probably meant to break him off the idea of escaping again.

The elevator doors opened, and instead of a long hallway, Keith found himself facing what could only be described as a foundry. It made little sense in comparison to the more advanced technology of the Galra; indeed, it looked like a scene from an old-time informational movie one would see on *Earth*. Three giant arc furnaces lined the walls, separated from the rest of the massive room by a wall made of what looked like concrete (Again? *How?*); all around were giant canisters, surrounding two long tables covered in sharp metal bits and pieces and molds.

Sitting at the table was a Galra, purple sash wrapped around their head.

"Hmm." The figure hopped off the chair they were sitting at, instantly disappearing from Keith's sight as they spoke with a crackling tone. "Ah! A new worker, huh? And a *blue sash*, at that!"

"I…"

Keith stared at the sight before him. The figure reappeared from behind the table, walked over to face him and stood up to their full height. They might have been incredibly tall, had they possessed arms and legs; as it was, the figure, standing on limb stumps, barely came to his hips, forcing Keith to look down at them.

"What?"

"*So!* Think you're gonna take my job from me, eh, you blue blood? You *half-breed*!?" The armless and legless Galra figure – a female – rasped as it went into a fighting stance, wiggling its arm stumps menacingly. "You're gonna have to *fight* me for it, you diluted *wimp*! You'll get *my* job over my cold dead body! Over my *cold dead body*, you hear!? C'mon! Put 'em up! *Put 'em up!*"

Keith stared at her, not quite sure how to respond to the tetra-ameliac challenging him to a death match. On the one hand, his blood and ego seemed to surge just slightly from the prospect of a fight, especially after such insults were lobbed at his very existence; on the other, his brain pondered if beating up an armless and legless Galra was a line that even he shouldn't cross.

After a moment, he began to slide into a tentative fighting stance. If he had to fight—

Then she burst into laughter.

"*BWA*HAHA! Oh man, the *look* on your face. You really thought I was going to *fight* you?" She smacked her stump onto her leg stump, clearly enjoying herself. "*I* don't care if you're half-breed or whatever! You're on the Ship of Misfits, kid, *no one* cares outside the Kommissar!"

She let out a very undignified honk as she caught her breath from laughing.

"Oh *man*, I'm going to enjoy having *you* around, newbie, ahaha. *So* uptight!"

"…It's not funny! Just because I—" Keith knew his protest was in vain, but his attention caught onto something the other said. "Wait, aren't *you* a half-breed?"

"That's a big *nope*!" The Galra pointed to her sash with an arm stump. "I'm as full-blooded as Holy Zarkon, that's what the purple sash means. I just happen to be what they call 'handicapped', like all the purples on the ship."

Complete with stumpy air quotes, no less.

"I take it you didn't get that memo in Processing?"

"Uh…" Keith shook his head after a moment of thought. It wasn't technically a lie. "No, I didn't."

"Not even surprised anymore. They've been getting a bit sloppy lately." After a shrug, the Galra held out a stump. "Name's Sarışın. And yeah, it's my real name like all the purples, not one Processing put on me. My parents weren't the most creative."

Another moment of hesitation before Keith took the stump and shook it. It had no suit gloves on it, namely because her suit couldn't have sleeves on account of having no limbs. The stumps she did have were covered in fur, and small fingers of sorts had been fashioned out of the leftover skin and bone spurs. He tried not to shudder.

"So!" The disabled Galra – Sarışın – seemed to sense his nervousness, since she started to bound over to the containers right after the handshake was finished. "You want to start working or what? Don't want Ms. Rules Police to come in and think we're *slacking* or something, yeah?"

"Sure." Keith knew his enthusiasm was just *overflowing* from him,

especially with his voice being so flat. “Let’s just do this.”

“Ok, morning we sift through junk. Usable scrap goes in these barrels, unusable scraps go in these ones. You’ll figure out quick which is which if you watch me. Afternoon is putting them through redox and pouring the molten ore into moulds for later shaping.” Sarışın waved a stump dismissively. “You don’t have to worry about that part, at least. That’s my job. Just…make sure you don’t fall into the furnace. And keep yourself hydrated, we have a hydrating station right over there.”

Pointing to a single container with a little spout.

“So? Let’s go!”

It wasn’t all backbreaking, though carrying the containers up to the tops of the furnaces certainly was a chore on Keith’s still-sore back muscles. It was mostly just hot, and given how he’d lived in the desert, it was saying something that he was uncomfortable with the temperature in the room. He kept retreating to the water container whenever he had the chance.

Probably the one solace he had was that Sarışın fed him quite a bit of information about the ship he was on and the Galra around him – certainly more than he’d had that morning. Mainly because it felt like she *never shut up*.

“…So, yeah. I came in with the first group that applied to the Inclusivity Initiative. That was thirteen *yıl* ago.” As Keith sifted through the piles on the table. Items that was basic metal scrap went in one pile; anything attached to non-metal parts went in another pile. “Me, Topal, Copal, Oğul, we’re all that’s left of them now. So, I basically know everything. Ever. Especially in this room. Just remember that…”

“…you blue bloods, you know why the guards might call you that sometimes, right? ‘Course you do, you were there when it happened.” While Keith grunted as he began pouring scraps into various barrels as the disabled Galra continued. “At least I hope you were there. You *were* there, right? *Bwa*haha!...”

“…heard you finally had Ağla’s food. Pretty good cook, huh?” As

Keith started dragging the unusable barrel to the pile of other unusable barrels. “Wasn’t originally one, but once she figured out what all us Galra could eat, she took right to it and improved the rations. After that she never worked a *gün* on the Assembly Line again, and good thing, there would be a riot if she didn’t make her special breakfast soup!...”

“…so I’d have said *vrepit sa* to you when you came in, because I’m actually allowed to, and you’re *kind of* supposed to salute when you go in and out of a room when on duty.” When he was walking over to go get the barrels of usable scrap. “But you half-Galras aren’t allowed to take the salute or give it. At all! Which is *dumb* because you’re military *regardless*, and *what* military arm of the Empire doesn’t allow their own troops to do a basic *salute*? So, we just don’t use it at all out of respect. You probably noticed that if you’re military trained, but it also means I can yank your chain better…”

“…also, *please* watch your step when you go up the stairs, you just have to take it slow. I seriously *cannot* emphasize this *enough*. If you slip and fall…” On the first barrel Keith carried up. “The heat of the melted metal is several thousand degrees, your tail will definitely go up in flames!...”

“…sooo, you have any hobbies, kiddo? You’re not much of a talker, I see.”

“No.” Keith grumbled, his ear twitching, as he carried another heavy canister up to the furnace. Oh, was she asking him a question? “I don’t.”

“Hm, that’s unfortunate. You’re gonna get bored on the Irem mighty quick!”

“Trust me, I won’t.”

“If you say so.” Sarışın shrugged as she carried her own canister. Keith could only wonder how she could do it with such ease, while he was struggling with it. “Unless you’re gonna make ‘try to escape the ship’ your hobby, in which case, you’re probably gonna be working with me for the rest of your life.”

Keith stopped, at this, slamming the canister down on the ground. Sarışın, for her part, just folded her stumps across her chest.

“You don’t know anything about me. I’ll escape.” His eyes narrowed as he felt the growl of frustration in his throat. “I *will*.”

“Uh huh.” Sarışın tilted her head. “With *what*? An escape pod? A secondary ship in the hangar?”

“Whichever one I find first on this insane ship.”

“Oh, *really*?” Sarışın turned to put her own canister down near the furnace mouth. “Hate to break it to you, kid, but I know my way around this ship. I know what’s here and what isn’t here. And the only way *you’re* getting off *this* ship is in a vacuum bag after you croak. And that applies to me, too.”

She slowly, carefully, began to pour the contents of her canister into the furnace.

“The *İrem* has no escape pods or secondary ships for us to use. At all.”

Keith’s eyes widened as the metal rolled into furnace, melting into liquid and slag.

“You’re here, you’re gonna stay here, and you’re just gonna have to deal with it. Trust me, and save your back the trouble, ok?”

"*Where would you go?"*

Keith’s back hurt again, though at least it wasn’t from neurotoxin-based paralysis (seriously, how the *quiznak* did the Kommissar do that?), but simply from hunching over and carrying barrels back and forth. That wasn’t to be the end of his work day, or his punishment. Even before he was finished eating his dinner (a pile of what could be called very tiny meatballs, mixed in a sauce and with a yogurt-y concoction, in a little bowl with bread and a drink), the Kommissar was in the Mess Hall, glaring daggers at him as she waited for him to finish.

All he could do was glare right back, before cleaning the rest of his supper bowl to delay the inevitable (still, was he *sure* Hunk wasn’t secretly in the back making this food?) and marching right into the Galley as everyone else departed.

The noodle Galra was back there to greet him with a little wave. Her blue sash, like the limbless creature he’d worked with in the morning,

was wrapped around her head, though with a ponytail of almost white hair poking out of the other end.

“Well, hello again, Kılıç!”

“Hmmn.” *Why* wouldn’t *it be the noodle I have to work with?!* “Hi.”

“I’m called Ağla.” *Grin.* “Head chef of the *İrem*! Fellow half-blood, of course. I heard you’ve enjoyed my cooking, finally?”

“It…” Keith’s ear twitched as he remembered the soup. “It was ok, I guess.”

“Oh, you *liar*!” Ağla laughed right at him, eliciting a growl from Keith. “You can’t lie when I’m around, I can tell when everyone lies. Did you know that? Did anyone tell you? Well, if you didn’t, you ought to know that, right now, going forward.”

Liiiiiar.

Had the noodle been the one to accuse him, then, the day before? How did she *know* he was lying even then?

“Now,” His thoughts were interrupted as the noodle brought him over to a very large panel with water beneath it. “I know you’re upset about not escaping, but really, you don’t have to be! Once you get used to living here on the *İrem*, it will be like living with a big extended family!”

“For the love of—“ Keith’s ears flattened. “Does *everyone* on this freaking ship know!?”

“Well, you *did* find my special hiding spot and slammed the door in my face.” Ağla brought her shoulders up, somewhat dramatically, as if Keith’s actions were an affront to her sensibilities. “I kind of figured that was what you were doing. But, yeah, the Kommissar *did* say you tried to escape during muster, remember? So even if you hadn’t done that to me, we all would have known eventually!”

“Ugh.” Keith scrunched up his nose and mouth. “I guess you’re going to tell me there’s no way to escape, too?”

“Well, I was going to ask if you knew how to scour cooking utensils, but you’re correct!” Into one of the cupboard panels the chef went. “No one’s left the *İrem* since it was commissioned. No escape pods for us, no special emergency landers in the cargos, no way for us to get

off! Sorry. But, next time you break curfew you can always hang out with me, if you want!"

"…Ha."

Keith looked away at this. He couldn't…he had to believe…but so far there was no—*no*. There *was* a way off this ship. He'd barely scratched the surface of the confusing layout; there had to be some hidden room no one knew about, or had been forgotten, with a means of escape that could be revealed.

Right?

"Oh, uh… you *do* know how to scour cooking utensils, yes?"

"Yeah." Keith's ears flattened. "I know how to clean pots."

"Oh, but we do it in a *special* way!" At this, Ağla smiled, bringing out a small canister, clicking the can open with a clawed hand. "I have my sources, after all! Ta-da!"

Keith's eyes widened as he heard the click.

This will hurt for a second, but it'll be worth it.

Then, the tell-tale pop of the canister being opened.

Keith's eyes widened.

"Is that--?!"

"You bet! Good old quintessence!" Ağla waved the canister around before placing it between Keith and herself. "This is the specially diluted stuff that *only* gets meted out to the *normal* military, too, so once you know how to use it, you can use it for practically *anything*." Then, in a whisper, as if imparting a dangerous secret. "I *might* use it in some of my recipes, but sorry, I'm not telling which ones~!"

Keith stared at the canister as the noodle Galra proceeded to scoop up a small glop of it with her claws, and going to down on a particularly large pot.

"…They used that…on my *back*…!"

“No escape pods for us.”

“Where would you go?”

“Even if you could escape…”

“Save your back the trouble!”

Keith stared at the ceiling of his capsule, his mind quietly trying to process everything that had happened since he first woke up on the ship. The truth was, he didn’t know what to think. He didn’t think he’d have to think about any of this. All of it seemed so *absurd*. The ship’s layout, the whispers and voices, the lack of security, the quintessence. The smiles of these Galra, these half-breeds and…‘handicapped’, as Sarışın called them. The idea that they could accept someone like him, that were like him in some way and could possibly understand what his feelings were on the whole matter of having this heritage. Even the whipping by the Kommissar was – at least now that the pain was just a very troubling memory – almost unreal, like a terrible nightmare.

The dark blue blood, dripping from Oğul’s mouth as he grinned back at Keith.

“Not bad.”

Maybe he was kidding himself. Maybe the last several days (*was it only a few days*? Time felt forever longer than it ever did, even in space, even *alone*) was simply his mind just making up a suitable punishment for his transformation into a Galra. Maybe his mind was still slowly dying in that escape pod, lost in space, and this was his mind’s final escape before the light finally went out for good on him.

What if it wasn’t, though? What if it was all real? He flicked a claw on his wrist, watching the dark blue blood start to congeal within the small cut he made. Still nary a trace of the red he was used to…

No, no. Surely it couldn’t be real. The idea of *Zarkon* letting a Galra with no arms and legs live and manufacture military arms for him was *absurd*. Not to mention the half-breeds on the ship, all of the blue bloods, the blue sashes like him. Then there was the misshapen… *creature* he’d found before being caught by the guards. It couldn’t have been a Galra.

...But what if it was?

Keith let out a moan as he rolled over, his eyes closing. If it was all real, what the heck was he supposed to *do*? *Befriend* these Galra? That was laughable and he knew it. He was not a people person to begin with; he could barely tolerate most people because most people were, well, *people*. There were days he could barely tolerate the people he considered friends, and he actually cared about his friends. (Not to mention, Lance absolutely didn't count as a friend. Or...well, Keith and Lance at least made a pact that they would always deny it if someone back at the Garrison asked, if they ever returned to Earth.)

And that was before he was apparently turned into a Galra. Or died. Or both.

At that point, Keith would have asked himself, what would Shiro do? Except he knew what Shiro would probably do. If Shiro woke up on a random Galra ship in the middle of space, with no explanation, no windows, no sense of location, no apparent means of escape, and tons of Galra in military garb being inexplicably nice to him (with the obvious exception of the Kommissar), what else *would* he do?

He would probably leave many bodies in his wake, alive or otherwise, before coming back to himself. It would be a really, *really* bad situation. One to be avoided at all costs, in all honesty.

Keith knew that, if this was all really happening, he'd have to keep his cool and be smarter than that. Smarter than he was being, at least. Meaning he actually had to stop and *think* about what he was doing. And *wait* to see what he could do.

Ugh.

Maybe try and figure out what was really going on with this ship. Maybe someone had already—

"You blue bloods, you know why the guards call you that sometimes, right? 'Course you do."

Oğul, staring back at him, blue blood staining his teeth.

Wait.

Blue blood.

Keith quickly looked at his cut wrist, his mind seizing on it. His blood

had started to turn blue, in the escape pod. Hadn't it? And the junk ship he was on, it had Galra on it. Galra workers, Galra tech…and that strange blue quintessence. Why the *quiznak* had he not thought of it before!?

Surely it means--!…Um. Something Galra-related.

Keith frowned. There was a connection, but he knew he was missing something. Or maybe he wasn't missing anything, but he just couldn't connect the pieces properly.

Why *blue* quintessence, when he and the other paladins had never even heard of such a thing? Why would it turn him into a Galra, when apparently its release otherwise precipitated the destruction of that junk ship? Why would he somehow have the same blue blood problem as those claiming to be half-or part-Galra that he'd never met or knew existed? *Were* they even part-Galra, like they claimed? What did being half-Galra even have to do with making guns, or the Galra Empire military? Why did Sarışın make those quips about him taking her job? (Well, no, that one sort of made sense, if that film about how half-breeds were *enemies* was any indication.) And how in the world did the ship he was now on manage to pick him up in the literal middle of nowhere?

How was *any* of this possible?

If he was dying, then the answer was pretty simple. The blue quintessence was messing up his shriveling brain but good, and he was just pulling on his own experiences to make everyone Galra have blue blood. The things that didn't make sense – like the armless, legless Galra and the…whatever was in that one room he saw…was probably just his mind having inconsistencies. The voices were… voices. Dying voices in his dying body.

But if it was *real*?…

"Not much of a talker, I see."

Keith winced. He wasn't. Not really. And he rarely talked to people he didn't trust or know well, except to put those people in their place when it was needed. He wasn't someone who had much use for casual conversation.

And he realized to his horror, as he started drifting to sleep, that starting tomorrow that would somehow have to change. Especially on this ship, if he had any hope of figuring anything about his

predicament out.

Akşam

BEEEEEEEEP** **BEEEEEEEEPP

The alarm jerked him out of sleep, and Keith found himself face down on his pillow, his sheet haphazardly tangled around him. The beeping continued, as the panel covering his capsule slid open.

"**GOOD MORNING.**" A loud automated voice echoed through the hallway, as the sound of skittering feet accompanied it. "**PLEASE PROCEED TO THE DECK 2 BOW FOR MORNING MUSTER.**"

Keith mumbled slightly as he let his slab come out of his capsule. He was still tired from the long hours that felt more like forever, and he looked at everyone as he landed on his feet, bleary-eyed.

He didn't dream. He couldn't say he was upset about it, though.

"Good morning, Kılıç!"

"Hey, Kılıç."

"Hurry up, Kılıç! Muster's a'waiting!"

Keith glared at each pair of glowing eyes as he shambled towards the elevator. Everyone looked so awake, compared to him. Way too awake, what with the long, terrible hours being inflicted on them. Good for them—

Oh, right. He was supposed to be somewhat…*nice*, right? Or tolerable, or something like that.

"Hi, Kılıç!"

At the next greeting, Keith stiffly turned to the hailing party and gave the tiniest wave possible.

"Good morning. Uh." Ok, he didn't know this Galra hailing him. Or most of the personnel on this ship, for that matter. "Comrade?"

The Galra, for his part, perked up just a little bit more and hopped off, a big smile on their face. Keith, for his part, simply watched flatly, before walking to the elevator. He could feel himself slowly rotting inside from his efforts at being milquetoast.

“Good morning, Kılıç!” Back to being stuffed in the elevator with everyone else. “Don’t worry, you only have a few more *günler* left of solo smelting duty! Ok?”

“…Yeah. Ok.”

Keith’s attempt at a careful response resulted in a few surprised whispers.

“Hey, he must be feeling better!”

“I hope so, myself, he’s been so down about things since he arrived…”

“Weren’t we all, in the beginning? Weren’t we all…”

And, of course, after a screaming fit from the Kommissar (surprisingly, he was *not* the specific subject of her tirade this time!), there was breakfast. He took his meal – a little pancake-shaped-breadstuff with a milky and honey-like inside, though he knew it couldn’t be milk and honey – his drink and his soup, and sat at one of the Mess Hall tables.

“Yo.”

Keith’s head came up as he was poking at his food. Oğul sat across him, staring right at him with yellow eyes. His own meal was long-since eaten.

“…What do you want?” Keith looked back down, frowning, his grip on his utensil tightening. “Interested in a Round 2?”

“Ha,” Oğul snorted through his nose. “No. I’m sure it would be plenty entertaining for the others, though. I’m just here to check on you.”

“Really?” As much as Keith really wanted to snipe back at his rival (because that’s what their fight meant, right?) he managed to hold his more acidic words as he responded. “Why would you check on me? I beat you up pretty good.”

“Hey.” Oğul might have rolled his eyes, if it were obvious for Keith to see beneath the bright yellow glow. “Anyone who can fight like you can’t be half-bad. You’ve clearly got some kind of military training. That…makes me glad a *real* soldier finally came on the ship!”

That…was not what Keith was expecting to hear. At all.

“Wh—“

“Don’t tell me where you learned your moves. I’ll figure out which academy you studied at, which commander you studied under.” Oğul pointed intently towards Keith’s nose. “Once I do, we can have a rematch so I can kick your tail properly. It’s only fair you give me that chance to regain the honor I lost to you, as your senior officer!”

He didn’t seem angry, or even remotely upset about the prospect. He even sounded weirdly excited. Not that Keith didn’t find the prospect of a rematch to kick Mr. Senior Officer’s tail again (*how* was he the senior officer, though?) a problem.

“Uh, sure.” He couldn’t help but smile toothily at this, his blood pumping just a little at the idea. “Good luck. You’ll definitely need it.”

“And when the time comes.” There was an honest-to-goodness smile on Oğul’s face as he stood up. “I’ll say likewise!”

With that, Oğul was gone. Several seconds later, Keith blinked, the thrill of a future fight ebbing away.

Wait…what did I just agree to!?

“So, Oğul challenged you to a rematch fight, huh?”

“…I shouldn’t be surprised that you know, should I?” Keith mumbled as he sorted out metals. He was trying really, *really* hard to do that whole nice thing. “You guys seem to know it very time I fart!”

“Whatever *that* means, *bwa*haha!” Sarışın grinned. “Hey, don’t be so glum about it. He’s from an old military family with old traditions and all that stuff. That he’d challenge you like that means he respects you and your ability.”

Keith stopped arranging the metals, turning to blink, flabbergasted, at the disabled Galra.

“He *respects* me?”

“You seem surprised.” Sarışın shrugged. “Hey, we Galra love a good fight, whether we’re full-blooded or just have a Galra grandmother. And Oğul’s dad, well…like I said, he’s from an old military family. You get that from those types. The whole honor and tradition stuff along with the victory or death.”

“Yeah.” *You fight like a Galra soldier.* “I guess.”

He was quiet, after that, for who knew how long. Long enough to start moving barrels before he even thought of saying anything else.

“So, I. Uh.” *Just spit it out, Keith.* “Has he really been on this ship for as long as you? He barely looks older than me.”

“You bet. He was the youngest in our group. Barely as tall as me at the time, and with half his baby teeth!” Sarışın easily hoisted a barrel over her shoulder. “They obviously don’t bring in kids that age anymore. Going through the changes, like every blue sash does, is…harder on a little kid with just a few *yil* on them. Whether or not they’re from a military family or not.”

“…military…” That reminded him. “These guns are different than the ones I’ve seen the other, uh, fellow grunts use on other worlds.”

“That’s because what *we* make the Heretic.”

“The *Heretic*?”

There was a silence.

“Well, *yeah*, that’s the name!” The quadriplegic Galra re-adjusted her scrap barrel. “Didn’t they tell you that in Processing, though?”

“No. No one told me anything.” Keith could at least be truthful on that point. “I was…just shot out of a ship in an escape pod and floated in space.”

“*Geez*, Processing’s really slacking recently.” And up the stairs she went. “When I started, they gave me a whole dossier I had to read before the even let me *near* the transport ship that brought me here! Now they just launch you guys out of cannons and hope you don’t splatter on the side of some forsaken planet on the way here. Did you even *meet* Admiral Otac before you left?”

“Admiral—“ It was a name Keith didn’t recognize. “No.”

"…Really, *really* slacking. He used to personally talk to every recruit that got through Processing and make sure they got through right." With a 'heh', Sarışın slammed her barrel down at the top of the stairs. "Now it's like he couldn't be bothered. I doubt that's really it, but—"

That was when she fixed her eyes on Keith.

"Hey, are you going to *help* me or *what*!?"

"Admiral Otac?" Ağla smiled sweetly. Fondly, even. "Oh, that's very sad you didn't meet him. He's quite kind, for a full-blooded Galra. Especially for a military Galra."

"Ngh." It was still weird to use quintessence to wash dishes, diluted or no. "Sad for *me*, huh?"

"He's the one who commissioned the *İrem* for us, after all." Being nice…ish was at least helping him get information, as Ağla continued to scrub and talk. "He's the one who gave us a proper place in the Galra Empire! He saved everyone on this ship, so we're all thankful to him."

"Proper place." Keith couldn't help but scoff at this. "Forced onto a ship for the rest of our lives making weapons, with no hope of ever getting off. Sounds *great* to me."

"Oh, but it's not like that! We *all* agreed to this, remember? We were *all* given the choice." Ağla gave Keith a very concerned look. "Admiral Otac *never* forced anyone before, at least. That was something he's *always* held firm to whenever he finds any half-breed and handicapped, even when other full-blooded Galra might try to insist otherwise."

Keith opened his mouth to rebut, then stopped and stared.

"…Why?"

"Why, what?"

"Why would you have *agreed* to this?"

"Oh," The smile lessened. "*That's* a long sto—"

“***HEY!***”

Both Keith and Ağla turned to face the doorway of the kitchen. Standing the full width and height of the doorway – and in fact hunching over to fit inside the frame - was a massive, muscular, grape-purple Galra; he was the tallest Galra Keith had seen yet on the ship. By leaps and bounds. His eyes were blazing bright as he stomped towards Keith, purple sash askew. Keith instantly bent his back knee, the aggression washing over him as the giant inched closer.

“*You*!” The huge Galra pointed a giant, beefy, clawed finger at him, leaning in mere inched from Keith’s body. “Are *you* the newcomer? Are you Kılıç?”

“Yeah.” Keith stared at the finger, then looked up at the irritated behemoth. “What of it?”

“I heard *and* saw my sister talking to you a few *gün* back, *pal*.” The finger didn’t stop pointing. “You *know* who I’m talking about! Don't pretend you don't! I’m here to tell you, whatever she says to you, you better not talk about it or make up stories about her or upset her in *any way*! If you do, I’ll beat your lights until they turn *green* from your blue blood!!”

“…Right.” Keith couldn’t hide the confusion in his voice. What? “I’ll… make sure to remember that.”

“Good!”

The finger stayed where it was for several moments, as did the glare from the giant and the aggressive aura. Up close as he was, Keith – once he took his eyes off the blazing sclera, at least – could see the giant scar on the side of the Galra’s forehead, and the accompanying missing patches of fur and hair to boot around it. What was left of the Galra’s head coverings wasn’t much better – greasy, unkempt, and wild, accompanied by a wet dog smell.

What the quiznak is this guy’s problem?!

“Right!” Finally, the giant Galra abruptly nodded, drew himself up and stomped out, though not before punching the frame of the doorway. “Good night, then!”

“Good night, Bilgin!” Waving, Ağla nudged Keith. “That’s Bilgin. He’s a full-blooded Galra whose job is generally to oversee firing ballistics on the guns before they get shipped. He’s…got brain damage.”

“I can see that.” Keith mumbled, bringing his hands to his own temple at the realization of the obvious illogical job placement for the crazy Galra guy. “Ok—*why* would anyone let him shoot guns!?”

“Because he invented the gun type we make on the ship! He’s the only one who knows how the ballistics need to be adjusted after we assemble them.”

“…Are you sure?” Keith frowned. “He doesn’t seem…um…”

Was it improper to just call someone *crazy* on this ship, he wondered?

“He was a brilliant man, you know. But, that was before his accident with the laser sword and acid.” Ağla waved her hands in the air sheepishly. “At least that’s what they say happened. His bosses asked the Admiral to take him in, and Dansçı signed on to keep him calm while he worked here.”

His sister. Dansçı.

Keith frowned. Who did he even remind her of? With the coloring, and the incessantly illogical babbling, it—

Oh.

Keith’s eyes widened as he remembered.

"Art…in motion."

NO.

Her? That was the big guy’s sister? But she was a complete and utter *loony* t—

“I know it’s not my place to say this about a friend, but…it’s so sad, isn’t it?” Keith looked over at Ağla, stunned, as she, with a sad smile, resumed her scrubbing. “All that promise she had, and look where she is now. But, at least her brother is happy, and…that’s what matters. Right?”

Ok, I’m pretty sure I’m not dead.

Keith lay down in his bed, staring at the ceiling of his capsule. He managed to get into his bed just before curfew, just before the Kommissar's screaming whirled through the hall and the deck.

This situation is just too surreal to be death.

A cadre of half-bloods. An armless, legless Galra. Six year olds being brought on board to work an adult's job. A full-blood brother and sister duo, where it was clearly debatable as to which one had actually lost their mind. The *thing* in the room that caused him to get caught that first night. All on a ship apparently commissioned for real by the Galra Empire, and overseen by a Galra admiral, to ensure what was probably life-long servitude. A ship where no one seriously questioned his story on how he got there or where he'd come from. On the contrary, he was welcomed with open arms and treated with immediate kindness and sympathy by most of the crew.

Almost like he was family. Like Ağla mentioned. A big, happy, extended family. Except he personally wasn't exactly happy about *anything* going on.

No sign of the Castle of Lions. No sense of Red Lion in the vicinity. No way to determine location. Same as when he woke up. But, he was starting to get…a picture. Of sorts.

Ok. Purple sashes are apparently full-blooded Galra with…something wrong with them. Keith wrinkled his nose. His brain was beginning to hurt even trying to imagine the implications. *Blue sashes are 'half breed' or…not fully Galra, at least. All the 'half-breeds' go through 'Processing', whatever exactly that is. And this has somehow been going on for…if* yil *means what I think it means, at least for several yea—*

He started as he heard his capsule panel slide open, nearly smacking his head on the ceiling as he tried to sit up.

"Hey, pal." The panel slid open, revealing Teori. Again. "Are you just going to spend the night in your bed moping again?"

"Mn. Don't see what else there is to do." Keith grumbled as his grimace fixed on the bigger Galra. "What are *you* doing? Don't we have a *curfew*?"

"Curfew only matters if you get caught breaking it." There was a slight gleam in Teori's eyes. "Like I said, you've *got* to learn to be a little more subtle if you want to avoid getting trouble. Anyways, Sarışın's inviting you to one of her little get-togethers. Got food and everything.

You want in or not?"

Keith took a deep breath. On the one hand, he *really* wanted to try and figure things out with his situation on his own. He felt like he was starting to get closer to an answer, and maybe if he just thought it over—

On the other hand, he was still kind of hungry, even after inhaling dinner. The meal wasn't much; indeed, though all of Ağla's meals were admittedly *criminally* delicious, the portion sizes meted out, at least to blue sashes, were only just enough to get someone through the day without collapsing entirely.

"…Sure, fine."

"Follow me, then." Teori backed away. "And…stay quiet, ok? The guards don't usually pounce on you unless you're making a lot of commotion."

Like me. Like with that…creature.

Keith shuddered slightly at the memory.

"This way." As quiet as a shadow, Teori guided him to the elevator, once he got out of his capsule. "Try not to wander off."

The layout was still incredibly confusing, especially after getting off the elevator. Indeed, as Keith disembarked, he realized that he wasn't sure if he'd been on this floor or not – every deck seemed to be different, yet at the same time hard to conceptualize and memorize for the long-term. Teori, however, seemed to know exactly where he was going, sliding against the walls as he did so.

"I…thought the recreation rooms were by our capsules."

"Haha. No *way* any of us would be caught there. Unless you're actually looking to be punished, that's the first place the Kommissar checks after our capsule room." Teori kept moving. "Not too far, now. Keep this way."

Bwahaha!

Keith froze, his eyes widening.

Mweheh…

It's happening again. Keith's hands slowly went to his ears. *Oh god, not*

again.

"…Kılıç?"

Make it stop. Make it—

"Hey, Kılıç." Keith nearly swiped at Teori when he touched his shoulder. "What—woah! What's wrong with you?"

"I…" Keith's throat became dry. "Can't you hear it? The sounds, the...?"

"Hear—"

Kehehehe…!

"—Oh." To Keith's surprise, Teori huffed. "Sarışın *is* pretty loud, isn't she?"

"*Sarışın*?"

"…Her special hiding hole is up here." Teori smiled as Keith stared at him, stunned. "O*ho*, I take it you haven't discovered the hiding holes of the Irem."

"The…"

There were voices everywhere. All around me, in the walls and I had found a secret panel and the—

"Are you serious?!"

"Hey, keep your voice down." Teori's voice sharpened even as he kept the smile on his face. "Listen, you'll see when we get there. Trust me, you're *not* going crazy."

Hiding holes. *Hiding holes.*

The voices were the others *hiding* after curfew.

Ha, Keith thought glumly as he trudged along behind, frowning. *Figures. Instead of being crazy, let's see how much of an* idiot *can I be…!?*

Closer to the stern elevator, Teori stopped at a small, striped panel bordering the floor. With a flick of his heel he smacked the door twice.

"*Halt*!" Yeah, that was definitely Sarışın's voice. It made Keith feel even *dumber* for not having connected the dots between the alcove and rooms he'd found, and the voices he'd heard, before this moment. "*What's the password, half-breed! Bwahaha!*"

"If you don't let us in I'll put your liquor on the top shelf of the pharmacy, where you can't reach it."

"…*Wow*, you actually sounded like you meant that." The panel slid open. "Is the newcomer with you?"

"He is!" Teori wriggled into the opening. "Follow me, pal!"

The panel reminded Keith of the one he had found the alcove within, as he slowly bent down and crawled in. There was a small tunnel, at the end of which was an archway. The archway opened into a surprisingly large room, where a dozen crewmembers had already gathered in front of a polka-dot pink wall. Several large canisters lined the walls, and the faint scent of booze emanated from them.

Beyond the canisters was a pillow, placed in front of a large bag of what could only be described as scrap, and all surrounded by more scrap. The junk was quite similar to that which was in the discard pile in the Foundry, save some of it had patched on them that were bright and colorful, as if those spots had been carefully polished and cleaned, bit by bit.

Well. Keith glumly frowned. *Someone takes their work home with them, huh?*

"*There's* the newcomer! Finally!" Keith's attention was taken from the scrap by Sarışın, motioned with a tulip cup. The cup was obviously nicked from the kitchen, and very obviously holding something alcoholic. "Just in time, too! You up for some good old-fashioned Galra culture? We're about to watch a *classic* zooprax."

"…Zoo…" Instantly Keith was lost. "Prax?"

"Oh, you know what I mean!" Sarışın waved her other arm stump. "Animated motion on the wall when we turn on the machine to project it! Drules got those!...don't they?"

"…Oh." It clicked. His mind went back to the Kommissar babbling on about a zoo before the orientation. "You mean a *movie*? Or…video? Hologram? We've got a couple words for it."

“Yeah, that!” Sarışın winked. “Yeah, this one I got from the last trade-off. It’s the 214th installment of the Xylaloe cycle. Sure to be hilarious if you know anything about the other 213 installments!”

“Trade-off?” There was clearly something Keith was missing. “What trade-off?”

“*Bwa*haha!” The group began to sit down on the floor, splaying their limbs everywhere as they grabbed a cup off the floor. “Less questions, more sitting! The movie’s about to start. Hey, pass the grub and the giggle water, we’re about to start! Remember, if you’re playing, dry your cup in one gulp every time the heroine exults ‘Holy Zarkon’!”

So this was…still really happening.

Keith slowly sat down near the back, looking for his own cup of… well, some kind of booze, apparently. Turning to his left, he nearly smacked his nose on the mouth of a cup.

“Oh.” He looked up, startled, to find the Galra next to him offering said cup to him. “Uh, thanks?”

“Welcome.” Keith nearly did a double-take when he realized it was Oğul. “So. How is Baltanz around this time?”

Keith didn’t respond, instead looking down at his cup, the purple substance within gently lapping on the sides. He could feel his heart pound nervously in its chest, and his face go slightly flush, at being taken by surprise by the Galra who was apparently his senior, not only sitting next to him without warning, but also asking that question. He wasn’t sure how to respond, or if his response would give away that he wasn’t quite as willing a participant as everyone else apparently was.

“…Hm.” Oğul turned away after the eternal moment, rubbing his chin. “Ok, you didn’t go there.”

“Nope.” Keith let out the breath he was holding. “Try again.”

With that, Ağla turned down the lights, and the movie began. Almost instantly over-dramatic music and narration kicked in, with the words ‘Holy Zarkon’ being trumpeted by a deep, female voice.

“Dry!”

Everyone around Keith began to down their drink, resulting in a few

burps and coughs surrounding him, even as they grabbed for a large canister. Keith stared at his own drink, sensing its potency just from smell, debating whether to down it. He wasn't exactly a drinker, for one thing. In fact, he'd never had an alcoholic drink before.

"Hey." Keith felt Oğul nudge him. "You ok? You don't have to play and drink if you don't want to. You can just watch."

Play?

"Dry!"

"Dry your cup in one gulp every time the heroine exults 'Holy Zarkon'!"

Oh.

Keith's eyes widened as he realized what exactly was happening.

"Dry!" Ağla called out, though she alone wasn't drinking. Instead, she was rushing around, her noodle arms reaching in and pouring the drinks for everyone else out of reach of the canisters. "My goodness, Honerva the Honorable is saying His name much more often than the last one, just in the past few *dakika*!"

Keith looked back down at his drink, and steeled himself. It couldn't be *that* bad, right?

"Dry!"

Keith downed his drink, at last, and nearly sputtered. It was like drinking licorice and milk that had been conveniently set on fire inside a peat furnace. Nevertheless, he wasn't going to chicken out of finishing it, and swallowed it all down. His throat burned from the drink as it went down.

"Ah, Kılıç!" His drink was instantly filled up. "You're not much of a drinker, I take it? It's ok if you take it easy this time."

Keith's eyes furrowed as he looked at his refilled drink. He surely could handle some liquor, right? It's just a drink, and the burning had already subsided, leaving a cool, almost minty aftertaste. After a moment, he shook his head.

If this was a game, drinking or not, he was going to *win* it.

"I'll be fine."

Keith couldn't believe how drunk he was by the end of the film. He stared at the ceiling as he laid flat on his back, a half-asleep smile on his face.

The movie itself was a long, mindless, slightly plodding thing with piles upon piles of fights – and a action-romance-comedy plot sprinkled in it. Apparently, the main heroine was a rich girl wandering the universe looking for "the one worthy of marrying her" – which would only happen if they beat her in combat – and constantly finding herself helping towns and worlds besieged by bad guys. If Sarışın was to be believed, there was hundreds of films in the series, and full-blooded Galra tended to man an afternoon of the newest installments, and just in general enjoyed watching it. If by 'watching', one meant 'constantly making quips and on occasion inappropriate remarks towards everything happening on-screen'. The lewder jokes tended to, not surprisingly, mostly come from Sarışın herself.

Said heroine it turned out, also invoked 'Holy Zarkon' constantly, since he was apparently the one who inspired her to go on her marriage quest. As a result, an ungodly amount of alcohol was imbibed, especially by Keith. Keith, who before had barely touched any kind of alcohol.

"*Wow.*" The next thing Keith knew, several people were standing over him. Wait, it looked like Teori cloned himself. "You are *so gone*, Kılıç."

"Hehehehaha." Keith couldn't help but chuckle at his predicament. He was going to be *so sick*. It was *hilarious* for some reason. "*I can't move*."

"I'm surprised he's still *talking* with how much he had! I don't even think Sarışın drank as much." Now several Ağlas were looking at him, as he slowly saw the ceiling start to move backwards on him. Oh, wait, he was being dragged out of the hidey hole. Never mind. "So, ah, we should probably move him to his capsule, too."

"I'll do it."

Keith let out a moan as he was picked up and hoisted over Oğul's shoulder. The world moved and spun a bit too hard, and he nearly vomited there and then.

“Mm*MM*mmm…” Keith mumbled as he closed his eyes, his ear twitching. It was a bit much. “I…I can walk…! ‘M fine…”

“Sure you are.” Keith continued to uselessly flop around over Oğul’s shoulder, like a fish on land. “Come on, Kılıç. Long *gün* tomorrow, like always.”

“Mmmmnnn.”

Keith didn’t remember much more after that. He was so drunk, he didn’t care. They could have thrown him out of an airlock and into space, and he wouldn’t have cared. He was tired. He’d figure things out in the morning.

If he could wake up the next morning, that was.

İkizler

Chapter Notes

> I wasn't actually planning on doing another chapter for the rest of the week, but...I got a promotion today at work.
>
> This calls for a celebration. Paying it forward from my real life to you wonderful readers. Please enjoy.

BEEEEEEEEP** **BEEEEEEEEPP

There was no movement from Keith's capsule.

"**GOOD MORNING.**" A loud automated voice echoed through the hallway, as the sound of skittering feet accompanied it. "**PLEASE PROCEED TO THE DECK 2 BOW FOR MORNING MUSTER.**"

There was still no movement from Keith's capsule. Indeed, Keith felt like he'd woken up from a deep sleep, and he wanted to keep sleeping. His head was also pounding hard and fast, right down to his eyeballs.

I…don't…want to.

He knew he had to. Finally, he groaned, slowly sliding out of his capsule. He didn't even bother with sliding out his bed. He just let himself fall on the floor with a grumble, feeling the cold floor as it soothed his face.

Ugh...ugh.

"Oh, good, you're alive!" A pair of feet were standing a few inches from his nose. Keith took a sniff; he guessed, correctly, that it was Teori. "We better hurry. Kommissar will ream you out if you're late!"

"Mmmmm." Keith closed his eyes. "Do I have to?"

"Sorry, Kılıç." His useless lump of a Galra body was picked up by the doctor. "No sick days here. And believe me, you don't want the Kommissar to find you like this...just do your best, ok?"

"Grrgh."

Keith let out a moan as he shambled to the elevator. He was never drinking again, competition or not. Never, ever, *ever* again.

“Ok, I think I’ve got it.” Oğul’s eyes shined with intensity. “Zebipit.”

“Not even close, man.”

Keith sighed with not a little annoyance, stirring the hot drink Ağla mercifully gave him for his hangover. His soup was, of course, all eaten. The small square of what Keith could only describe as a dumpling, stuffed with the space equivalent of chickpeas, topped with a dollop of space yogurt, and emanating the scent of what he could only equate to hot red pepper, was not yet touched. He'd get to it, though. It looked and smelled pretty amazing.

“Not even close.”

“Hm.” The intensity dimmed, but the look of determination stayed on Oğul’s face. “You’re right. Your punch indicates a different system, different academy style. How about…”

“Commander?”

Keith blinked looking around as he spotted two guards coming towards their table. Oğul’s relaxed countenance vanished, and he was up on his feet, hands behind his back.

“Yes?” Keith looked back and forth between the two guards and Oğul, his confusion growing more and more by the second as Oğul responded to the guards’ quick salute. “What is it, officers?”

“You’re needed on the bridge.” One of the guards motioned nervously. “The admiral has new orders he wishes to convey to the ship’s commanding officers, with regards to the deployment. Its apparently very urgent.”

Keith saw Oğul’s jaw tighten, ever so slightly.

“…Right.” He shot an apologetic look to Keith. “I’ll see you later, then.”

With that, Keith watched as Oğul left the Mess Hall, flanked by the guards. As he turned to finish off his drink, his eye caught everyone else staring at Oğul’s receding back. Several had worry etched on their face.

Hm. *Wait.*

Commander?!

Sarışın didn't arrive in the foundry until somewhere upwards of an hour after Keith. She was present at the meeting, which did, admittedly, surprise Keith as much as Oğul's rank. Apparently, there was a change in the *İrem*'s current course, though she didn't say what the change was and why it needed to happen. Classified information for commanders and Kommissar only.

"…What? You really didn't know? No, never mind, Processing sucks now, shouldn't be surprised anymore." She bemusedly pointed to the glowing insignia on her chest. "Yup, I'm a commander too! Oğul and I are the highest-ranked personnel on the ship – he's the leader of the blue bloods, and I'm the queen of the full-blooded cripples. Which means, as a full-blooded Galra, I can also boss all you half-breeds around, so *bow* to me, midshipman, and lick my boots! *Bwa*haha!!"

Midshipman. The lowest rank on the *İrem*, apparently, if not the whole of whatever arm of the Galra military this was. It also meant that the glowing marks on his suit were his rank insignia within the Galra Empire. Keith would remember that, just in case it came up again.

And, also because of the irony that he now was higher-ranked within the *Galra Empire* than he ever was in the Galaxy Garrison, where he was simply a recruit with no rank. Which meant he might have one leg up against Lance on *that* front. Maybe he could boss the non-Galra Lance around, if he ever came on board the ship.

Probably not, though. The subtle ranking system based on how much blood one was born with from specific ancestors was still more than a bit difficult for Keith to accept. It hadn't exactly worked out so well on Earth when *they* had tried it in the past, after all.

"If that's true," At least Keith had a feeling that Sarışın was just joking around this time as he responded – it seemed to be her thing to rile him up. "Why is the Kommissar even *here*? Is she even a commissioned officer?"

Sarışın shrugged. If she was bothered by it, she didn't show it. Maybe

she'd seen so much during her long time on the Irem that the Kommissar's presence was just a fact of life.

"All I can say is that she's *apparently* the type of full-blooded, full-blooded individual us misfits need to remind us of our place. I mean, we get our ranks through our years of service, so our ranks are legit. But otherwise, yeah. She's the real power on this ship when the admiral's not here, and the glowy bits are consolation prizes from the military. You know how that goes."

"…maybe a little."

Keith knew how it felt to be rejected – even temporarily – because, on the flip side, he had Galra genes. Of course, Allura, for all her (somewhat justified, Keith would have no problem admitting) prejudice towards the Galra, never went out of her way to insult him. Or brutalize him. Or really do anything the Kommissar did to everyone on the ship because they weren't perfect little fuzzy soldiers.

Unfortunately, he was getting the message loud and clear that the Kommissar was hardly alone in her thoughts on the matter.

"Oh, *my* rank? I thought you knew from my insignia." Ağla seemed pleasantly surprised when Keith asked her, after supper. "I'm technically a lieutenant. But, my official title is chaplain – I'm the *İrem*'s spiritual advisor, as it were. Generally, I service to those half-breeds who have just gone through Processing. No one's really used my services in a while in that field, though. Not even you, *ah*! Its quite sad."

"Oh. Uh, you're a *chaplain*?" Keith's eyes furrowed as he scrubbed a stubborn food stain off a plate. "I do sort of remember you not drinking last night, actually. Is that why?"

"Well, yes, actually!" A small smile formed on Ağla's lips, with slight snaggle tooth to boot. "I was…well. It's against the tenants of my order to be inebriated. My people…"

She trailed off, before her eyes widened. She suddenly started shaking her head, looking towards the doorway frantically as she did.

“Oh, I-I mean, u-um, well, m-my…f-*former*…peo-people…”

Keith watched as she suddenly floundered and shook while speaking. Why was she *stuttering*? He had never heard Ağla stutter. Was she flustered about something? About mentioning the other half of her heritage?

She’s…she’s scared?

“…er, well, *a*nyways!” And then the stutter was gone, as was the fear, as soon as the chef changed the subject. Keith’s eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. “What did you think of my little cure for your liquid adventure last night…?”

Keith walked off from kitchen duty, his mind racing. Well. He’d gotten somewhere. He knew he’d gotten somewhere. What was she scared of? The Kommissar?

…Actually, that was probably it. All the abuse the Kommissar clearly heaped on them wasn’t exactly *subtle*, after all. All the obvious contempt and hatred for the crew below her, especially the half-breeds like himself. He could feel his back ache just thinking about it. In the face of such, of course it made some sense to just pretend everything was perfectly fine when it obviously wasn’t. Just to grin and bear it. Always look on the bright side of life.

On the other hand, that also meant he was starting to wonder about the whole happy family thing. Was it real? Was it being on this ship with one another that made them happy, or was it just fear of the Kommissar? It had certainly *felt* real during the movie. At least the parts he could remember. They had laughed, they’d shot the breeze, they drank and stuffed their faces with food. They actually acted like…*people*.

Except for Sarışın. Sarışın acted how she acted. She truly seemed to not care much about pretending to be an obedient servant, or about what the Kommissar would do to her, no matter what happened. Then again, she was a purple sash, and a commander to boot. But then *again*, he’d also seen a purple sash get taken off to be punished—

“Good evening, Kılıç.”

Keith's thoughts were interrupted by a voice in front of him. He instantly stopped, with a short Galra smiling quietly at him. Actually, her size was comparable to Pidge's, and her blue sash looked big on her.

"Um." He held a hand up with a frown. "Hi."

"It's almost curfew." She looked at him, bemused. "You know the Kommissar is having the guards looking twice as hard to make sure you're not wandering around, right?"

"Pff." At this, Keith scoffed. "I'm not scared of her. What's the worst she can do, kill me?"

The smile slowly collapsed from the girl's face. She opened her mouth to speak, only to be stopped by a strange, gibbering moan. Upon hearing it, Keith froze.

He knew where he'd heard it before.

"Oh, Copal…" She looked behind her, towards where the groans originated. "Topal, come on, it's just Kılıç. It's just the newcomer, I promise, ok?"

A sound of protest. Keith could feel the color drain from his face as he spotted something coming forward. The terrifying sight, of the lolling head, the gnarled, skeletal limbs, gnarled limbs, misshapen eyes staring right into his. It came forward a little bit, but only a little bit, from around a corner, letting out a questioning trill. It wasn't the exact one that he'd found his first night, but there was no mistaking it.

It was them. The navigators.

The *things*.

"Oh, I'm…sorry, Kılıç. They're being a bit shy." The girl looked up at Keith. "Are you ok? You look sick—"

And then next thing Keith knew, he was flying forwards with a shout, pain shooting from the back of his knees, and landing right into the arms of the poor Galra girl. His head whipped back to face what had hit him; he could feel blood start to seep from where he'd been hit, and he'd been hit pretty hard.

It was the thing he'd seen the first night, staring at him. It had to be. Every detail was just as it had been before. Strange, chortle-like

sounds came from its throat as it looked at him, its eyeballs intently darting up and down to look him over, its malformed mouth a sideways D. Keith's eyes, meanwhile, widened to saucer-size as he trembled.

It remembered him. It remembered him, came up from behind him, and then—

Wait.

Was it *laughing* at him?

"*TOPAL*!" Holding up Keith with a surprising amount of strength in one arm, the female Galra scolded. "That was *not nice*! You apologize to Kılıç, there was no need to hurt him!"

This evoked a very annoyed moan of protest. Several moans, actually, with different fluctuations and guttural mouthing, as if the creature was complaining, or trying to. It was punctuated by an annoyed hand-flail towards Keith. Wait, what did *he* do?

"Topal." The girl's voice was quiet but firm. Apparently, she could understand the creature's incoherent attempts at speaking. "I understand that he frightened you—"

Wh—what!?

"But I'm certain he's learned his lesson by now. You shouldn't have hurt him. So, you need to apologize, right? Its only proper..."

Keith stared at the…Topal? Was that it's name?...and it stared back at him. He thought back to those moments, just before he'd been captured. He remembered his terror and fear when he first saw it, how its deformed countenance had struck him to his very core with disgust and horror. Even now, he still felt that, deep in his chest; he still felt cold, and his face still felt drained from the sight. Still heard the screech ring in his ears.

Of course, it hadn't occurred to him to think of the flip side of the situation, that this…Galra? Was it a Galra? It didn't even have a sash!...had been scared right back. Scared of him, a newcomer it had never seen, who appeared out of nowhere, and…

Quiznak, it was just so much easier to just think of this creature as just some terrifying monster, rather than someone with their own thoughts and feelings. Except he really couldn't anymore with the reality now

presented to him.

Topal, meanwhile, was clearly having none of it, and let out some very disingenuous moans at Keith. Keith could swear he heard a sarcastic lilt in at least one of those moans, and he could help but stare flatly at the creature. Even he didn't buy the apology.

"Topal." The female Galra put her free paw on her hip. "You need to apologize *nicely*, Lieutenant. How would you like it if right now he were being as rude as you're being?"

There was a long silence. Slowly, Keith allowed himself to leave the grip of the smaller Galra, and he quietly studied the creature in the chair, who was still looking at him, unimpressed. The more he looked, the more he could see the softer features, the longer eyelashes, and the more feminine-looking, almost delicate features on the creature's hands. Oh. Was Topal…a *girl*?

Finally, he looked away, feeling the heat come back to his cheeks.

"Um. Right." He rubbed the back of his neck. This felt really awkward, especially since it wasn't two minutes ago that he was still thinking of Topal as an *it*. "I'm sorry for scaring you. I…I won't do it again."

That got a reaction. The creature's eyes widened, and it began to babble again, though Keith still couldn't understand anything that was being said. It did end with something that sounded apologetic, at least.

"Its ok?" He hoped that she'd been saying she was sorry. "We just started on the wrong foot."

Or maybe that was the wrong thing to say to someone who was in a space wheelchair.

"Er. Yeah."

"That was very sweet of you, Kılıç." The female Galra that was not Topal nodded, then nodded to the chair-bound individual behind her. "Would you like us to accompany you to your capsule? You look a bit unsteady from that hit. I could get Teori to look at you once you're there…"

"I'm fine." As he took a stumbling step. He could feel blood start pooling in his wounds, into a blistered form. *Ow*. "Actually, never mind. That sounds good."

“This way, then.” To the two in their chairs. “Come on, Copal, Topal.”

Putting an arm under Keith’s, the girl proceeded to guide him towards the nearest elevator. They were followed by Copal and Topal, who proceeded to chat incoherently with one another through drool as they went.

“I’m glad you made up with the twins.” The girl gave him a little smile. “I know they can be off-putting because of what they look like, and they know it too. But that’s not their fault. They were born like that.”

“Born like that.” That made Keith shudder, despite himself. “…Are they full-blooded, or…?”

“Full-blooded. It’s a rare autosomnal defect that only occurs in full-blooded Galra.” They came to the elevator, which opened up with a ping just as soon as the panel was touched. “Topal and Copal are fraternal twins, female and male. They’re actually quite brilliant, but their physical deformities prevents—“

“Hey, Bakıcı!”

She was interrupted by two guards who were in the elevator, and Keith’s heart stopped as they looked at him.

“What’s the newcomer doing with you?” They pointed menacingly. “You know he’s on thin ice with the Kommissar right now.”

“Oh, it’s all right.” To Keith’s surprise, the girl – Bakıcı – shrugged, giving the guards a soft smile. “I was taking Topal and Copal for a walk, and I thought it might be nice for the twins to get better acquainted with him. They had a bad start, after all.”

“…Eh, that’s true.” To Keith’s greater surprise, the guards just nodded. “Just don’t let the Kommissar see you. And don’t cause any trouble to warrant us stepping in, newcomer. Trust us, it’s *really* not worth getting cause twice in one *hafta*.”

“Of course.” The girl’s smile faded and she nodded. “I’m sure he understands. You have a good evening, ok?”

With a final nod, the guards got off at the next deck.

“The guards don’t usually pounce on you unless you’re making a lot of commotion.”

“They…let me go.”

“Of course they did.” The elevator dinged, and the group slowly got off. “They understand. They’re loyal to the admiral, after all. They know why most of us are here.”

Gently, she left him to his capsule. Behind him, Keith could feel the twins looking at him. Watching as he was carefully placed on his slab, face down.

“There’s no need to deepen *our* suffering with everything that’s already happened to us, you know?”

Teori came over within the hour, rubbing some diluted quintessence on the giant blood blisters that had formed on the back of his calves. As he did, Keith couldn't help but ask about the navigators. Bakıcı had started to explain the problems with the twins, but never finished it.

Teori did confirm the whole bad-genes part, along with the twins' brain chemistry rendering them unable to speak developed language as one result of their defect. Hence their babbling, which, apparently, Bakıcı had deciphered to an extent as her time as their caretaker. However, it also stunted their bone structure, leaving them unable to walk or use their hands properly.

“How do the twins navigate without their hands? They have special chips in their brains that allow them to communicate to the bridge, even when they’re not on it.” Keith hissed again as more goop was applied. “Their minds are otherwise pretty impressive, though. They had already memorized 3,000 star charts between them in the cellar their family made them live in, so when a friend of Admiral Otac rescued them, he got them navigatior commissions on his personal warship. They transferred here when the Irem was commissioned.”

“…Huh.” Keith didn’t want to ask why the twins were living in a cellar. He didn’t need to; he had a good idea why their family would do such a thing. “So, 3,000 star charts? And navigation is just between the two of them?”

“Well, them, and Cüneyt, back in the day at least. They were the original navigators on the ship.” Just a little more quintessence on his

left calf. Keith could feel the warmth spread in his legs. “Cüneyt…he wasn’t related to them, but he was a good guy. Well, I liked him, at least. He had the same problem the twins do, just less severe. Not anymore, though. He’s, uh...he’s dead.”

There was silence at this.

“…And…well, since then, Bakıcı was brought on to take care of the twins round-the-clock, and the Kommissar…she just…doesn’t go near the two anymore without the admiral’s say so.” There was a slight crack in Teori’s voice. “Heh. Yeah. So.”

Keith’s eyes widened, and his head lifted up, as his synapses fit the possible implications of what *that* together. Before he could say or ask anything, though, Teori had abruptly stood up and left without a good night.

That's...!

Karaciğer

BEEEEEEEEP** **BEEEEEEEEPP

Keith was awake and walking to the elevator the next day before the next announcement started.

"***HAZIROL!***" The Kommissar stomped back and forth, her eyes narrowed and her movements predatory, at the morning muster. "Our quotas *still* haven't been met! You are all useless! How you continue to *exist* continues to amaze me! You worthless *yarıldı*, crawling around like you're *special* because you're on this ship…!"

Keith tuned her out, waiting until he heard her scream of dismissal. It seemed to be the best idea, at the time. Especially given what he figured out last night. What an awful, awful Galra. It almost made him long for the quiet, subtle dignity of Iverson.

Almost.

And breakfast, as always, was quite delicious. It didn't quite get the taste of disgust out of his mouth, but the soup went down easily, as usual.

"So, does *any*one like the Kommissar on this ship?"

He might have approached the subject with Sarışın with his signature subtlety when he got to work. At the question, Sarışın just started laughing.

"*Bwa*haha! I thought you already knew the answer to *that* question."

"Ha." Keith hauled another barrel on his head. "I guess so. I kind of wish I knew what that admiral saw in her."

"What do you mean?"

"If he's such a nice guy," He slammed the barrel down. "Why would he choose *her*? What did he *see* in her?"

“Hey.” For once, Sarışın’s tone actually had some measure of seriousness to it. “I’ll be honest, kid, I’ve been on this ship *longer* than her and even *I* don’t know much about her. She doesn’t mingle with us unless she wants to make a point, beat us up, or during muster. All I know is, she’s here, she was sent here by the admiral to watch over us, and in our position he - and we - don’t have a choice.”

“You mean we don’t have a choice if she *accidentally* kills us.”

Well. That came out. Sarışın actually frowned at his words. There was no anger, but there was certainly discomfort in her movements as she began to stiffly crawl down the stairs from the furnace.

“She does have a problem with going overboard on occasion.” It was curt, and it was all that Sarışın would say. “Look, Kılıç, real talk. We do what we can with what we got, you know? When you’re stuck in an asteroid field, you gotta just learn how to pitch and roll. And sometimes you don’t make it. Personally, I’d rather we’d all make it than be a splatter on the side of the ship. Or…or be a pile of slag in the furnace. All of us, which includes *you*, by the way. So…”

Keith held his hands up. He got the point. He’d hit a bit of a nerve with Sarışın.

“Let’s get back to work for now, ok?”

“Yeah. Sure. Sorry I brought it up.”

"Mm."

Sarışın was uncharacteristically silent, after that.

After that particularly long, silent, and awkward Smelting shift, there was another muster. Keith pointedly avoided eye contact with the Kommissar and ignored her words. She was screaming at an unfortunate – Ürkek? Was that the name? Maybe he *should* have been paying attention – and proceeded to box their ears repeatedly in front of everyone. When she was done, the purple sash was on her knees, sobbing hysterically, and several Galra shifted uncomfortably as the Kommissar continued to scream at her.

What was the point? Was the Kommissar going to kill her after this? Did *anyone's* life matter to her on this ship other than her own?

Yeah. I hate you, Kommissar. He could never say it out loud. But she couldn't read his mind, so that was a good thing. Even if his cheeks flushed as muster came to a close. *I hate you* so *much. And I've fought Zarkon. What do you think about* that*, lady?*

After another (very creamy, very meaty, very *delicious*) dinner, Keith found himself back in the kitchen, cleaning pots, fighting to stay awake. He wondered how long this punishment really would be; perhaps the Kommissar intended to keep him on the backbreaking, grueling schedule until he dropped dead.

He let out a deep breath, just as Ağla finally bounced into the kitchen. In her hand was a large, black, tulip-shaped cup. Before she'd left, Ağla had revealed to Keith that it was the Kommissar's special drink – a concoction that was made at her specific request. When Ağla made the food for everyone on the ship, she had to take into account every possible nutritional need and specialty.

That included special nutrition bags for the twins to feed into the base of their necks, who couldn't take food normally (and, as it turned out, it was these bags that Teori and Hemsire had used to save Keith's own life, but, as Ağla reassured him, she altered the composition so he could take it through a normal intravenous tube). It also included the Kommissar's diet, which included no water at her insistence. At all. All of her food had to be vacuum-dried before it was presented to her. Not even the Kommissar's drink could have water as an ingredient, and Ağla had no problem figuring out substitutes to personally serve her with.

It was probably for the best, Keith reasoned, lest the Kommissar decide to rip the chaplain-cum-priest's head and limbs off, and then beat what was left of the torso to pulp, for *daring* to inconvenience her.

"Ah!" Suddenly, the pot he was working on was yanked from his hands by Ağla. "Don't worry about these, right now. Teori wants to see you in the Med Bay."

"Really." Keith looked at the noodle Galra warily. "And the Kommissar won't run me down for it?"

"She shouldn't!" That wasn't a reassuring answer. "Go on, it'll be ok."

Sure it will be, chaplain. Amen. Sighing, Keith dropped the scrubbing implement into the pot and shuffled out of the room. *Ha, I feel* so *light and hopeful just thinking about it.*

Even so, he kept his eyes on the lookout, shifting them left to right. Wait, where *was* the Med Bay? He knew he needed to use the elevator for it, but otherwise, he hadn't really paid attention that first night. So, he compromised and just pressed every button on the panel once he got inside. He'd just go to every deck until he found the right one.

One of the buttons on the top of the panel went red, letting out a buzzing noise before the elevator closed doors and moved.

Hm. That's new.

The method of cluelessly using the elevator and going to every floor, while certainly time-consuming, did help Keith with figuring out certain decks, and their number, at least in relation to his own understanding of ships. It also meant he might have some luck in figuring out Galra numerals along the way, if he paid attention.

It seemed the Mess Hall, the Kitchen, the hidden alcove he first used to try and escape, and Ağla's reading room that he'd stumbled on, was on deck…3? The bow where muster happened seemed to be deck 2 from what the announcements said. Once he got there, the elevator stopped, the panel that had flashed red blinked, and then the elevator began its trek back down towards the bottom.

…*Ok.* Keith stared at the panel as the doors opened to the bow on deck 3 again. *There's a reason that button flashed red and I went back down. A deck I can't access? Deck 1? Or…*

Deck 3, again. Deck 4 was…well, he wasn't sure – he hadn't had the time to explore much. Deck 5 looked familiar – it reminded him of where he was dragged and tattooed when he'd been brought to the Kommissar, and yet at the same time, it didn't feel like it. It only heightened his realization that the *İrem* was a confused and confusing ship. Not that the *İrem's* layout necessarily an accident, but still, who the *quiznak* designed a ship like the *İrem*?!

Deck 6 had the capsules, the recreation rooms, and who knew what else. After a moment of hesitation, Keith decided to get off and look around. In any case, even if the Med Bay wasn't on this floor and he was somehow caught wandering, it wasn't *technically* rule breaking if he was summoned away from the dishes and just so *happened* to be lost, so really, how could the Kommissar punish him?

Heh. There was a small smirk that totally formed on his face at the thought. *Take that, lady.*

Spotting a panel as he passed the capsules, he pressed on it and watched the door slide open. There was a completely empty room, save for a few chairs and a table with some tablets on it. Walking in, Keith picked one of the tablets up and stared at it. A literature cover with an obscenely over-buffed Zarkon, staring down at a group of cowering, evil-looking aliens, stared right back at him. He could barely make out the words on top, but it probably said something ridiculously propaganda-laden.

…*Recreation rooms?* Keith dropped the tablet down in contempt and looked around. Aside from the other tablets with similar ridiculous covers on it, there was nothing else remotely entertaining as he picked up one last tablet. Unsurprisingly, it was another cover of Fabio cosplaying as a cat-like alien. *Yeah, right.*

“There you are!”

The tablet dropped back down onto the table at the sound of…well, *sound*, and Keith immediately tensed. Then he realized it was just Teori.

“You’re getting the hang of the ship now, huh?” The bigger Galra’s head had popped out into the doorway, and his claw motioned towards it. “Come here, I’ve been waiting for you. I need to give you something!”

“Medicine?”

Keith walked to the door, then followed the fellow half-Galra to a room right across the way from the recreation room. Within seconds, he was looking around and confirming as he entered that, indeed, this was the Med Bay he’d first woken up in, and it was on the same floor as the residential boxes they were stuffed in, after all.

“I’m not really sick right now. Or…hurt, shocking as it may be…”

“Nope, this is even better!” The hand that hadn’t been waving was behind Teori’s back, and quick as a flash it came out, once the Med Bay door had slid behind Keith. “Surprise! A present for you. Your welcome aboard gift, everyone on the Irem gets one like this.”

In his claw was a large storage canister, it’s size much like the quintessence holders Keith had seen in the cargo hold. That similarity,

however, wasn't what jarred Keith when he looked at the 'present', so much as what was floating inside the clear liquid within.

Floating within were two dark, red, soft-looking blobs. One was long and slightly triangular-shaped, small tubes sticking out of it; the other, smaller and almost kidney bean-shaped, surrounded by a small light pink hose like a ring. White capsules, and long tufts of black strings, were held in suspension like satellites around the larger flesh-like entities.

Teeth and hair.

His teeth and hair.

"I've been working on preserving these for you since you arrived." Keith felt his stomach turn as Teori spoke. "*Usually* after you get Processed, you're given some of your old bits once your body's good and finished. A tune-up for the Galra-fied parts, make sure the old bits that need to be gone are gone, and to make sure any extras you grew due to the radiation are out. Heck, I still got my extra aortal chambers and vestigial eyeballs in one of the cabinets here, and Bilgin personally left me the piece of his brain that he…well…he wasn't at all Processed the same way *we* are, but…uh, safekeeping."

Keith stared at the contents of the canister, not saying a word. Not a single word. He barely registered Teori clearing his throat.

"Aaaanyways, apparently Processing *really* didn't like you or messed up or *something*, because when I first got you out of that pod and scanned you, you had extra bits out the wazoo! You hadn't even *finished* changing when we got you!"

"Extra…"

Keith's chest felt tight thinking about it. The pain he had felt when his spine had snapped. That feeling of growing beneath his own skin. His claw grasped at it.

"Yeah." Teori nodded as he offered the canister. "I had to be careful and excise the extra body parts out of you, without killing you. I admit, I've never done it before, manual surgery wasn't my field. Especially not on a *lung* attached to the jugular *and* sternomastoid*, that* was tricky! But I think I did a pretty good job on my first attempt, don't you think?"

A pause.

“Full disclosure, I *did* leave the extra pancreas, thyroid and liver in there, just in case you develop a endocrine problem later on. That…*seems* to be a common thing when we half-breeds in the program get older.”

A second, longer pause.

“…You look like you’re going to be *sick*—“

Keith responded by covering his mouth, letting out a retching noise as he ran to the nearest vomit-friendly receptacle he could find.

Later that night. Back in his capsule once more. Keith stared at his present. The liquid glowed in the dark confines. The color reminded him of when he floated in space, alone. The pain, and the dying, and the changing. The waiting for no response.

His organs were a dark red. Almost purple. His teeth were still white, and one of them still had the filling they’d given him before they allowed him in the Garrison.

He shut his eyes. Teori and Hemsire had actually taken the time to clean the pod and its aeration unit while he was still recovering from near-death, to considerately (so they believed, at least) deliver those things to him. It was practically a custom to have such remnants, and the idea that Keith’s arrival had not even warranted his being properly cut open, and extra and old bits pulled out and preserved before being shot off, was *astounding* to them. Processing had declined, but, in their minds, Keith had been spectacularly failed.

Not that the escape pod would be any use to him for escape, anymore, anyhow. He now knew it was no longer on the ship, and his bayard and armor were likely scrapped to boot. Once Keith had finished bringing up his previous meal, which no longer tasted as delicious coming up as it had going down, Teori had explained that the escape pod he was found in – most types of escape pods, actually - had not been designed to sustain life for long periods of time. In fact, the average maximum time to safely survive in the type of escape pod Keith was found in was one *hafta*, and that was accounting for a healthy, full-grown, not-shapeshifting Galra.

For whatever reason which eluded Teori – naturally and *thankfully* – Keith had been ejected, without any safe recourse for his transformation, into in space for much, much longer than he should reasonably have been. When the guards had first brought Keith into the Med Bay, he was close to dead in large part because of the pod's irreversible contamination. It was really a good thing, per Teori, that the navigators – well-versed in the possibility of escape pods having new crewmembers after the previous two newcomers had been quickly thrown at them the same way – had spotted him before he'd been too far gone to be revived. Thus, the pod had been well beyond repair, and no parts existed on the ship to replace the ones broken in the aeration systems, or to replace the breathing liquid.

The guards had eventually had someone with clearance – Teori couldn't say who, exactly, as he didn't know – properly jet the pod out into space, while the metal armor and parts were sent to Smelting. He didn't say how the pod was jetted. He didn't care to know how. Nor had he given any thought to escaping before the pod was off the ship.

Why not? If the pod worked…

Keith had wanted to ask, but realized he hadn't needed to.

"Even if you could escape…where would you go?"

The truth of the matter was, for all his desire to get back to his team and resume his search for Shiro, Keith knew Teori was right. He didn't know anything about where he was. He didn't know how he was going to contact the Castle without being caught and punished. He didn't know how he was going to get off the *İrem* alive.

His ears quietly twitched. He didn't want to think about it that way. His team was looking for him. They had to be. Even if they found he was Galra when they find him, they would surely allow him back with no hesitation. Things would change. Of course they would, and of course Keith didn't want them to change. He didn't want to remind Allura of the creatures who had taken away her planet; he didn't want Hunk to have to change what he made just to accommodate his new dietary needs. Pidge would treat him, on some level, as a science experiment, and Lance…well, Lance would just up his stupid cat jokes.

God, he almost missed the stupid cat jokes.

And then there was Shiro.

Keith opened his eyes up, staring at the canister. Shiro had been the first to accept his heritage, when they'd first uncovered the Blade of Marmora. Maybe it was silly to be in any way afraid of Shiro while looking Galra. At the same time, though, Keith knew that it would be a shock. Perhaps it would be too much of a shock.

Like a bee stinging its own reflection upon seeing it. If that reflection was a Galra and happened to be Keith.

As he kept staring at the capsule, he felt his eyelids get heavy. Heavy with exhaustion, heavy with realization, as he drifted off into quiet sleep. He didn't know what he was going to do. He didn't know how he was getting off the *İrem*. didn't know how he was going to handle Shiro, if he ever did get off. He didn't know *anything*.

Save that he was going to be on the ship for much longer than he'd ever wanted to be.

Teeth. His teeth kept falling out of his mouth. He didn't know where he was or what was going on. It was all blue. Just blue. It was hardly as vivid as other dreams, hardly even worth remembering. Save for the teeth. The teeth felt quite real, and the sounds of the grinding against each other, knocking against his aching gums, was shudder-inducing.

"H-help!" Finally, he was able to scream, before something else fell out from his mouth. His brain? Or his intestines? They both were neon pink coming from his mouth. They were both wrinkled, crinkled, and shriveled. "Someone help me! HELP ME!!"

"Shut up."

He felt the smack to his face, even though it didn't hurt, and he turned back, eyes widened, to see—

He couldn't see who it was. But he knew the voice. Of course he did. It was only the voice of an enemy. The voice of a Galra.

"You fight like a Galra soldier." Zarkon approached, yet at the same time, he didn't approach. His bayard – wait, it was Shiro's how did he— "You know. You know now. You fight like a Galra soldier."

The more Zarkon spoke, the more he sounded like Keith. The more Zarkon looked at him, the more Keith was certain it looked like him. Him, old, weak, gnarled. Galra.

All Keith could do, all Keith could even think of doing, despite everything, despite his struggles to do and think of anything else, was to open his mouth and

*****BEEEEEEEEP** **BEEEEEEEEPP*****

The alarm jerked him out of sleep, and Keith found himself face down on his pillow, his sheet haphazardly tangled around him. His canister was still near his head, the liquid glowing softly.

The beeping continued, as the panel covering his capsule slid open.

"**GOOD MORNING.**" A loud automated voice echoed through the hallway, as the sound of skittering feet accompanied it. "**PLEASE PROCEED TO THE DECK 2 BOW FOR MORNING MUSTER.**"

"Hello."

Keith had just managed to climb out of his capsule when he came face to face with the grape-soda Galra. Dansçı. He felt the fur on the back of his neck stand up.

Don't be stupid. Don't say anything.

"Dear Kılıç." She gave him a smile as she leaned over to look in his capsule. "I see you have your *leftovers* from your old self."

Don't. Say anything.

Nevertheless, Keith frowned, and slapped his capsule's panel from behind, letting the door to his bed snap close. The smile on her face didn't lessen as she leaned back, this time to his ear.

"You know, *I* saw your flesh pieces before, when I was sick and being treated by dear Teori. When you were still growing into your lovely body. You don't have to hide it from *me*."

Her voice was soft, airy, almost wispy. It made his ear twitch, and his furry hair blow, as her breath hit him. She started to gently wrap her arms around him.

"*I know you're not half-Drule.*"

Keith's eyes widened. He felt a breath escape between his teeth, like a hiss, as he jerked back from his grip to stare at her.

"It's our secret." Her smile now felt terrifying as she continued to look at him. "Don't worry. I know how to keep secrets. I won't tell—"

"Dansçı!"

Keith watched, her heart beating fast, as the woman turned to look and see Bilgin stomping towards them, eyes widened.

"You're going to be late for muster! What are you *doing*!?"

"…Nothing." She turned away from Keith. "I was simply saying good morning. It's all right, brother. *I'm* all right."

Those last words seemed more insistent, louder, than everything else she had said. Keith looked at her, then at Bilgin; he could swear that, as she passed by him (and not quite as gracefully as she'd been before – was that a *stomp* she did on his foot?) there was something in Bilgin's eyes. Something that wasn't the stunted madness that he surely should have had with pieces of his brain ensconced in the Med Bay, or the rage he'd felt the first time Bilgin had confronted him. What was it—

"Hey." Suddenly Bilgin was looking at *him*, shaking his head, before glaring at him. "What're *you* looking at, pal!?"

"…Nothing." Keith's ears twitched as he held his hands up, backing off. "No problems here. I'm just going, ok?"

"Then go."

With that, Bilgin stomped off, leaving Keith to take deep breaths of relief, before he made his way to the elevators. He let himself trudge in last, meaning he was on the opposite end of the elevator from the object of his apprehension. Which perfectly suited him fine.

Note to self: avoid Dansçı as much as possible.

Intihar

The desert.

He was back in the desert. Back on Earth, back…home? Keith opened his eyes, feeling the grainy sand on his face as the hot wind blew around him. His shack was right in front of him, its wood foundation creaking in the weather.

How did he get here? When did he get…home?

His feet felt sluggish as he walked towards his house. Yet the more he walked, the further away his house seemed, the heavier his feet felt. After what felt like an eternity, he stopped, dropping to his knees, looking down at his hands.

His hands, his claws, which were growing an inch a minute.

He let out a screech – his voice sounding more inhuman by the second – as his legs and arms shot out below him, ripping through his clothing. Sharp pains in his sides ripped through him, and he looked over in time to see another pair of arms and legs clawing their way out of his torso, slamming down into the ground and spraying gore-encrusted sand everywhere.

His house was also shrinking as rapidly as his body was changing.

"Help." He gurgled as he tried to get the words out, his throat closing in. "Meee…"

His limbs stretched, splayed, snapped backwards and up, and his body fell to the ground. He gasped, trying to get back up, to move, to do anything, but he could do nothing. Nothing but watch his house collapse as one of his monstrous, arachnid-esque limbs smashed down onto it, turning it into a pile of splinters under his ever-increasing strength.

His house…

"There it is!"

Then he heard the roars. The sound of his friends' voices. He tried to should out to them, but his voice was gone, replaced by a terrible , hissing shriek as he tried to reach out with a limb. He tried to reach his red lion, reaching his mind through the bond he and the machine-creature shared.

He felt nothing but static.

“There it is!” He could hear all of his teammates speaking, shouting, screaming. “There it is! There it—“

BEEEEEEEEP** **BEEEEEEEEPP

The alarm jerked him out of sleep, and Keith found himself face down on his pillow, his sheet haphazardly tangled around him. His canister was still near his head, the liquid glowing softly, as his nose knocked against the glass while he turned to move out.

“Ow…!”

The beeping continued, as the panel covering his capsule slid open.

“**GOOD MORNING.**” A loud automated voice echoed through the hallway, as the sound of skittering feet accompanied it. “**PLEASE PROCEED TO THE DECK 2 BOW FOR MORNING MUSTER.**”

Keith rubbed his eyes, quietly sliding out of his capsule. With a sigh, he proceeded to the elevator, proceeding to pick at the ends of his gloves. He’d been working on ripping the fingers off his suit, and he’d managed to eliminate six. The claws on his exposed, sweaty fingers proceeded to continue working on the seventh, and as he squeezed himself in, he heard a satisfying rip.

“Modifying your suit?” He heard someone pipe up in the elevator. “*Ha*, the Kommissar is going to *flip*!”

“I don’t care.” Keith simply proceeded to start on the eighth finger. “She can deal with it. This is how I like it.”

“Fine with us if you want to get beaten again!” Keith’s responder simply snorted. “…Man, fingerless? That’s actually a good idea outside the Foundry, that would let my claws breathe…”

He’d seen others modify their suits and sashes. Technically, their sashes were supposed to be worn over their shoulder, then tapered down their torso, diagonally, tied down at the hip. Between the hair wraps of Sarışın and Ağla, to Teori wearing his like a scarf, and various other styles in between, very few actually followed that protocol to the letter, as Keith noticed. A small, significant personal touch that the crew could do, with what little wiggle room they were allowed.

He decided that morning he’d follow likewise, among other things.

“***HAZIROL!*** You all--” Instantly, the Kommissar stomped over to Keith, her eyes wide and blazing. “*KILIÇ*! YOU INCOMPETENT *STAIN*! WHERE IS YOUR SASH, AND ***WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH YOUR SUIT!?***”

“Hm?”

Keith nonchalantly looked at his hands, then held up his forearms for the woman to see. Wrapped around his left forearm was the belt cloth of his sash, tightly wound like a vambrace.

“My sash is right here.” He could practically see the steam coming from the Kommissar’s ears as he innocently smiled, wiggling his claws. “Guess all the pot scrubbing I did must have ripped the fabric—“

He was rewarded with a punch to his diaphragm, whereupon he crumbled to the floor, gasping as he held himself. Still, even after that, and even as the Kommissar continued to debase him as little more than a mewling, good-for-nothing *yarıldı*, followed by a hard kick to the side, his smile never left his face.

Worth it.

The day after that was his last official double shift with Sarışın and Ağla. The day after that marked a week and a day since he’d arrived on the *İrem*, perhaps. Maybe.If he was counting right. Keith didn’t bother to keep proper track of his time on the ship, after that. He still intended to get off the ship, one way or another. He just knew he had to bide his time, and search when he could for the elusive secret escape that he knew had to be on the ship. *Some*how.

It was just a question of figuring out just how long that would be before figuring it out, and counting the days wouldn’t have helped his personal morale one bit. He could be on the ship for months, even years, for all he knew, before anyone even thought to check this specific Galra ship in the middle of who-knew-where because there were no windows to track the stars with. And knowing that was a difficult enough thing to accept. Having to count it out would have made it worse.

Slowly, but surely, the days began to blur into one another, and Keith

began to notice things. About himself, about the ship.

One of the more surprising things about his Galra physiology was, as time went by, his eyesight started to change again. Everything had originally seemed sharper, more defined, but once his body was apparently settled with the changes, his eyesight also settled. Which caused his short-distance eyesight, surprisingly, to *dim*. He would have thought Galra would have incredibly sharp vision regardless of distance, but he was apparently wrong.

That wasn't all, either. Greens and blues and reds on the ship – namely from the eclectic paneling on the walls and secret doors – began to become more and more grey. Unless they were bright and bold – like Ağla's breakfast soup, or the sashes they wore – those colors were dulled. Purples and yellows seemed to be the only colors he could still see with little to no greying hues in them.

Then again, everyone's yellow eyes glowed, as did the purple insignia on their suits. The glow in the insignia, and the sashes, suddenly made a little bit of sense. He did ask Teori, just in case he was going blind, and was assured the eyesight adjustment was a normal occurrence. That, and seeing more easily at night, though that would never be a problem since the ship's lights were always on.

He also found he was a little less tired after the long shifts, and even less hungry despite the tiny rations – the Galra body was capable of lasting longer without sleep, Teori explained, and on less sustenance than other species. This was most helpful in battle, of course, when a fully healthy, full-blooded Galra could last for upwards of a week without food or even water if need be. Half-breed Galra benefited from this endurance, as well, even if on the *İrem* they were given little more than starving rations and minimal sleep.

The *yarıldı*, as the Kommissar would put it, also had difficulty with controlling their anger under stress, Teori further revealed – as if, by that point, it was a *shock* to Keith that someone like him snapped easily.

In any case, he also figured out that, during muster, blue sashes were always on the right, and purple sashes on the left, facing the Kommissar. This logic also, in theory, applied to all the working stations on the ship – in Gun Assembly, in Cleaning and Polishing, in Crate Loading (which Keith got to do a grand total of once – it was loading finished guns into giant space crates and sending them through a dumb waiter to a "retrieval area" further below decks, and

it was *totally not boring*), and even at the scrap separating tables in the Foundry (though Sarışın didn't care and never used it).

The Kommisar didn't wear a sash; the guards and the navigators didn't either. At least in the case of the navigators, it made sense – it was difficult for Bakici to dress them without extra accoutrements to begin with. Nor did the guards, since they weren't part of the Inclusivity Initiative anyways, outside of being outside grunts. On the other hand, Keith would have thought the Kommissar would have worn a sash to lord over everyone. Or maybe it got in the way of her screaming, or something stupid like that.

Purple sashes were still punished just as hard as blue sashes, though. Except for the navigators, who were also the only ones who didn't muster. She wasn't allowed to punish them, *ever*, nowadays.

He also learned there were many hiding holes and secret rooms. Quite a few, actually. On the Mess Hall floor alone was likely a month's worth of looking for secret alcoves and nooks and crannies. If Keith was truly dedicated to finding a way out, he had his work cut out for him to find that one lucky secret passage that would get him down to...somewhere. The cargo bay, perhaps? The ship had to have one, where they stored Heretics ready for shipping. If he could find a way to get down there and sneak onto a ship while they were loading the guns for transport, maybe...he just had to figure out when to sneak off, to use his free time wisely.

Otherwise, he had to force himself to go to work, lest the Kommissar come and drag him around and beat him up again. Outside of numbers, which he was starting to differentiate between, he was still having problems reading the Galra script to actually figure out what room was where when he had to go to work alone. The only thing going for him was that he tended, more often than not, to be on the ever-annoying Gun Assembly than now. Nearly every day, actually. That script was now pretty easy to differentiate.

"Hey, hey." Unfortunately, when he started going to the wrong job, or trying to sneak off to look for a new secret room of hiding hole or passage, someone would inevitably tap his shoulder. "Where are you going, Kılıç? Don't you know you're…oh, you're here with me. Good."

"…Oh." At that point, Keith would just shrug and pretend that was totally what he'd been doing. He had little choice. Searching could resume later. "Right."

'Here', in this case, at that moment, meant Capsule Cleaning, and it was surprising to Keith – the capsules they slept in were never cleaned as a routine duty, or even at all. However, in this particular case, it only meant cleaning capsule number 3. The capsule's occupant had gone to bed the previous evening, and when she didn't show up to morning muster, the Kommissar's bellowing could be heard through the ship as she stormed onto Deck 4, intending a world of punishment for the unlucky worker.

When the panel on the capsule opened with the slam of the Kommissar's claws, the unmoving, unbreathing body of the inhabitant within stared back at her with glassy eyes, a small trickle of clear fluid mixed in with blue blood drying on her chin and around the inside of her bedding area.

After being made to pull the corpse out of the capsule (She was pale, almost gray, and *too stiff*, and yet at the same time she looked like she could blink at any time) Keith stared at the faint blue stains within the capsule before he began to scrub with – what else – diluted quintessence. He didn't know what it was that was mixed in with the tell-tale blue blood; the smell wasn't familiar to him. But there was no mistake that it was industrial in nature. An industrial fluid that had no right to be in anyone's system.

Unless.

"It's…a shame." Keith slowly climbed out, canister with teeth and an extra arm within tucked under his arm, as Hemşire - the acting mortician - took off his gloves and gently laid the girl's stiffened head down. His tone was quiet as he gently began to wrap her into what looked like saran wrap. "Lēkhaka came in the same time as I did. We were actually hatched from the same clutch, if you can believe it. Us, and 45 others."

A small pause, as Keith watched Hemşire wipe his eyes.

"We…were the only two who made it to this ship after we were taken. She was my last link to…well. The past. Not something we're generally allowed to look upon fondly with the Kommissar around, I'm afraid. Us being *Galra* now and all." He looked at Keith. "Still, I… hope you don't mind if I ask to keep her canister. Silly and pointless

sentimental reasons of mine, you see."

Keith didn't need to be asked twice. He simply handed over the canister. He knew that the grateful look on Hemşire's face didn't really convey just how much he appreciated the gesture from Keith.

Still, one thing puzzled Keith.

"Lēkhaka?"

"Hmm?"

"I thought…" Keith looked at the empty capsule. "I thought her name on board was Yazar."

At this, Hemşire simply smiled sadly, and turned to leave the area.

During that evening's muster - in a completely unrelated event, no doubt – the Kommissar brusquely announced that as of that day, a certain chemical formerly used in the Polishing and Buffing Station would henceforth be permanently banned from use and locked away from *yarıldı*. Anyone caught trying to take any from its storage would be severely punished.

There was no mention of Lēkhaka – or Yazar – and no one dared to bring the names up to the Kommissar's face.

There was an impromptu movie night after that. This time, Keith heard about it during supper, and made sure to attend. This was apparently a rerun of a previous *zooprax* she'd screened – this one being a slice-of-life *musical* about a group of miners who came to challenge their corrupt viceroy – whose daughter also happened to be in love with the main character miner – to some kind of space sport for the right to elect a new ruler. It was a little like a cross of lacrosse and rugby, if those sports also came with laser guns and a lot more fighting. And if Galra kept breaking into massive (and, Keith had to admit despite himself, impressive) song-and-dance numbers through the proceedings.

It ended with the miners winning, and the corrupt viceroy trying to renege on the deal. That was when a lightning bolt, apparently from

an off-screen Zarkon, blasted the corrupt viceroy (or his cartoony puppet, as this was also apparently a comedy) into space and bouncing off the moon on his way out. Because of course it ended with Zarkon pulling a *deus ex machina*. And that was in no way uncomfortable for Keith as he drunkenly squirmed where he sat.

The drinking game for this game involved either drinking every time the annoying sidekick to the main character came, every time a song started, or both. Wisely, Keith decided to just drink when a song came on. The hangover wouldn't be nearly so bad the next morning.

Sometimes, as Ağla would refill his cup, his eye would catch the dark green in the corner by the alcohol canisters. It looked like there was some more scrap, and some more polishing chemicals around the pillow. Two pillows, in fact. Apparently Sarışın now had a helper with whatever she was doing.

Shrugging, Keith turned back to watch – according to Sarışın – Lēkhaka's favorite movie. It was, weirdly, not bad at all, save for the ending.

There were whispers in the days after that. Whispers of Lēkhaka, how long it would be before her body was jetted if it wasn't already, memories of the good times. Always with the name Hemşire mentioned, as opposed to the one she'd been known by on board, and never when the Kommissar was nearby. Keith barely knew her, so he had nothing to contribute.

He heard two other names whispered as well, though never to him. *Helvicta* and *Ilçeler*. The names meant nothing to him. Other former crewmembers, perhaps?

It did make him worry about what might happen if he decided that… *that* was his only escape after all of his efforts and attempts, but when those thoughts bubbled up, he put a cork in them. He wasn't going to think like that. He simply couldn't. He didn't want to. Nevertheless, he had the feeling that the recently deceased had not been the first to act on that compulsion – or be the last, for that matter.

He'd stumbled on another panel, and a hidden room within, near the Foundry. All over the smooth yellow walls, there were scribbles and

drawings in various colors. The predominant color, however, was dark blue, all of it within the confines of large, clawed fingerprints.

They were, he learned, the work of a previous crewmember. Taiteilija was their real name. That was also the name they were known by, among those still alive, by those who had worked with them. Oğul simply shook his head when Keith asked about the name they had been given on the ship.

As it turned out, Taiteilija had been a blue belt with one arm who Sarışın had started training as her possible replacement in the Foundry, several *yıl* back. They slipped on a piece of metal and fell into the furnace one day, when the Kommissar pushed them and Sarışın around for not going fast enough. No one was ever certain if it was truly an accident, or if Taiteilija had simply snapped and let themselves be pushed.

Naturally, the Kommissar was never punished. Keith decided to add that to the Reasons to Punch The Kommissar In The Teeth Before I Make My Escape list he was very rapidly compiling in his brain.

It also went without saying that Taiteilija wasn't something Sarışın enjoyed talking about at all. She preferred sticking to talking about her own life, which, Keith noticed, was decidedly less slipping-and-falling-into-molten-liquid-y. The more Keith heard of it, the more colorful it turned out to be.

"So how old do you think I am?" She smirked as Keith stared back. "C'mon, guess!"

"Um…forty?" Keith shrugged as he carefully – carefully – climbed up the Foundry stairs. "Or whatever the Galra number for that is."

"*Bwa*haha!" Sarışın gave him a toothy grin. "Not even close. How about five hundred?"

"Wh—" Keith brought his hand under his jaw to make sure it hadn't dropped to the floor. She barely looked that much older than him. "Five hundred!?""

"That's right." Sarışın began to hop up the stairs. "I'm *old*! I can actually remember when Holy Zarkon *showed* Himself at public functions! Can't say anyone else around here on the ship's ever seen Him personally. Outside of Admiral Otac, of course."

Keith almost opened his mouth at this, but stopped himself.

“So you’ve…seen Zarkon in person?”

“Sure did, back when I was with the arena troupe! After I escaped prison, that’s where I went next. I fit right in with the rest of the freaks.” Next to the furnace went the barrels. “Back when they had arena troupes, and Holy Zarkon actually showed His face during them, you know. Before it was just random foreigner aliens and criminals and prisoners stabbing and shooting at each other with no idea what they were doing. You ought to have seen it. The arena was a practically a festival that went the whole *gün*, with music and entertainment, and the fighters they used were actually, you know, *trained*.”

“They were still prisoners, though. Slaves for life until they died in the arena.” Keith felt his cheeks flush, thinking of Shiro and the limited memories he had revealed to everyone. “*Weren’t* they?”

“Sometimes. But not always. Not back then, at least. Not every fight was to the death. Some of them – like my third husband – “

“The googly-eyed guy?”

“Yup, Guplan!”

A sign Keith was paying attention, or trying to. He could probably have written a book about Sarışın’s colorful life with what he knew, if it was all true. According to her, she was born in a mine with no limbs, joined a pirate group to leave the mines, got tossed in prison, escaped and joined the circus, joined the military after the circus was broken up, was discharged and rejoined four more times despite them not wanting a ‘stumped freak’ in their ranks, was a mercenary and pirate again in between, *might* have owned a planet for a few weeks because of shoddy bureaucracy, and finally was Admiral Otac’s aide-de-camp when he started the program, since at some point she had saved his life on the battlefield. She somehow also had a dozen kids in between with seven husbands and multiple fake names.

Apparently.

“So, he and a good bunch of them were professionals who went through academy to perform, and even though they *were* slaves at the start, they got paid and everything based on their performance. It was even possible to win your *freedom*, imagine that.” Sarışın shrugged. “Then again, back then those hooded charlatans also kept their nose out of things outside of everything that didn’t involve them. And they actually let the military do *their jobs* and let the arenas do *theirs*

without turning everything us Galras do into some mumbo-jumbo ridiculous magic spell divination projects or *what*ever."

"You mean…the Druids?"

"Yeah, *them*." Sarışın turned her nose up at the mention of the name. "Creepy, *annoying* parlor tricksters. The moment they start moving up in the world again with their stupid tricks, you don't see hide or hair of the emperor for *onyıl* unless you rate with them. Heck, none of us would even think the emperor was even *alive* if Admiral Otac didn't manage to get some audience time now and then!"

Keith's ears perked up slowly came up at this. So, the military wasn't as important as it seemed to him or the other Paladins at first look, and the Druids were in control of more things than they thought. Not that they hadn't anticipated that, but on the other hand, the idea that the Druids' power waxed and waned through the years was new.

The fact Sarışın was so openly brazen about her dislike was also a bit worrisome, though thankfully the Kommissar was nowhere near. Then again, Sarışın never seemed particularly intimidated by her presence, aside from going quiet when asked about Taiteilija. It was probably why Keith felt the quadriplegic grow on him, *just* a little.

"Actually, some of the others aren't even convinced Holy Zarkon is still around now, even though Admiral Otac says He is and that He's seen him within the past few *yıl*. Just ask anyone what they think!" Sarışın chuckled as she and Keith began to lift the barrel, its contents spilling into the furnace. "I mean, *I* think He's still around, just imprisoned by those crazy wizards right now. He'll get out, though - He's lived *this* long!"

"Oh, you really want to know?"

"Sure."

"There are some who would consider such talk blasphemy, you know. But...I honestly think Holy Zarkon's been long gone." Ağla smiled. "At least the original. I've always thought that 'Holy Zarkon' is just a ceremonial title now, taken by successive Galra who happen to look like Him."

“You think he’s…” Keith looked left and right as he leaned against the sink, watching Ağla. “A *doppleganger*?”

“Something like that.” Ağla looked up. “It’s similar to the practices of…o-of my f-f-former people.”

There was that obvious stuttering and nervousness again, like before.

“Uh, you ok?”

“I-I’m sorry.” Ağla clasped her hands. “I just…the Kommissar doesn’t approve of us speaking of our pasts. Surely you’ve realized that by now, right? A-and as a priestess, I don’t like…lying…I...I should speak the *truth*, a-and...”

Before he realized it, Keith had walked across the room, leaning against the sink as his tail slowly wagged in concern.

“I don’t care if you talk about it. And she isn’t here now, you know.”

The chef looked up at this, startled at Keith’s forwardness.

“Are…you sure?”

Keith shrugged. As he did, he watched her hands clasping more tightly.

“W-well…” She closed her eyes. “My grandmother was a Galra…she and her sisters came to the planet Meda - um. My planet - when she was young, and married the head priest. Her sisters all married into my grandfather’s people, too. Most of my village was related to them in some way because of that…and when the Galra…Empire came…”

She trailed off. She was silent for some time as she went back to scrubbing pots. Keith watched her, seeing her nervous, tight, fast scrubbing with the diluted quintessence. There was clearly more to the story.

“…So…uh. I never knew my parents.” She looked up, surprised, as Keith finally spoke. “Not well, anyways. I only really remember my dad. I was orphaned at a young age, got shuffled around in foster and adoption and all that. Didn’t even have a clue about any of…this,” waving to himself, “until recently. Came as a bit of a shock to even learn of the Galra.”

To say the least, he added silently.

“…Everyone knew of the Galra, where I came from.” Alga’s voice was quiet as she responded. “I was always scared when grandmother told us about what the Empire was capable of. What they might…*do* to people like us. But...the person in charge of the troops that captured us was Admiral Otac. He saved my life when I went to submit myself to his will.”

Her hands slowly went to her chest.

“He promised to try and help my whole village, too. At the very least, he knew he could save me. So, I agreed to go and join the Inclusivity Initiative. I don’t regret my decision; I did what I could. Even if…” She smiled a little, finally. “Even if I shrank a little bit, as a result. You know, my grandfather’s people are quite tall. Taller even than Holy Zarkon! It was kind of scary when I was being Processed, and I just got small and smaller and my spine compressed…”

She continued smiling, talking about how she was this tall. No, *this* tall. She couldn’t fit into some of the rooms on the ship with her original size. Being able to talk about it made her a little more relaxed, at least.

She didn’t mention her village’s fate again, though.

Later that night, Bakıcı invited Keith to spend a little time with her and the navigators. It was a bit boring, as it mainly consisted of making sure the twins didn't hit each other or wander off from their rooms when it was time for them to go to bed. They were also fed through their neck holes, which was a bit difficult to watch, after which the twins hung around their room, gibbering to one another in their incoherent speech.

"Holy Zarkon?" Bakıcı seemed surprised by the question. "Geez, that's a loaded question, isn't it? Well...I don't know. I never thought of the idea of Him being *dead,* but...I don't know. I always thought he was more of a folk hero. A national myth. An allegory on Galra power than a real person. At least that's what my father would say..."

"Your dad?"

"Yeah. He's Galra military." Bakıcı shrugged. "Never knew my mom.

She dropped me off when I was born and disappeared. And when I was old enough, well, I passed, so I was able to get through school and all that. I worked at a home with disabled Galra military veterans, and that's how I met the admiral."

'Passed'? What...

"Oh." Keith scratched the back of his neck, wincing as he felt raised, scaly skin. It felt like a scar. He stopped scratching, lest he aggravate it. "That...actually sounds normal."

"Ha," The nurse scoffed. "If you saw how the military treats disabled veterans you'd be singing a different tune. That's why Admiral Otac was there, to try and recruit some of them to come onto the ship. But, most of them thought it was a trap to kill them, so none of them went for it."

"A *trap*?"

"Yup. Its not uncommon for the Empire to do that, since no one retires from the military unless they're basically maimed and unable to hold a gun. But of course, to have maimed retirees instead of soldiers who died gloriously in battle is considered a stain on the honor of Galra everywhere by the powers that be. So, whatever the Empire finds communities of veterans, they 're-enlist' them and use them as target practice or front-line fodder."

"...And it also makes less veterans to take care of, less resources to waste." Even to their own soldiers, soldiers who'd given more than enough for the Galra Empire's glory. There was nothing but disdain and contempt. "Victory or death indeed."

"I volunteered to go with him. I decided to take the risk and see what it was really all about. And I ended up here." Bakıcı looked over when Copal began talking again. "Hm? You think Holy Zarkon is a mass auditory hallucination inherent in those with Galra genes? That's...um...that's a very *interesting* theory..."

This resulted in a sudden burst of angry babbling from Topal, with Copal responding in kind. Apparently, Topal believed Holy Zarkon wasn't a hallucination, but was a real immortal who was empowered by the sun of the Galra homeworld to live forever. It was all Bakıcı could do to stop the twins from coming to blows over the discussion, as Keith watched in surprise at just how animated the two got in regards to the fight.

"No, Topal, your sister is not a big doo-doo head—Copal! Don't stick your tongue out at—!"

As Keith walked one particular morning to his assignment, soon after his night with the navigators (ugh…Gun Assembly), he spotted Bilgin quietly slipping into one of the hidden panels. Without a second thought, Keith slipped in behind him, before the door could close. Instantly, he was plunged into darkness.

…*Uh.* Suddenly Keith regretted his impulsive move. *Quiznak?*

A single light suddenly clicked on, and Keith found himself inside a small compartment, filled with bookcases surrounding a single metal table covered on the sides with metal scrap. Quickly he slipped behind one of the bookcases, the smell of the wood filling his more sensitive nostrils. It reminded him, just a little, of the scent of a fir tree.

Like Christmas, back on Earth. He'd celebrated it, a few times in his life. Once in a great while in the foster homes, when the families he stayed with thought it was a nice gesture at best, and an annoying requirement to shut the kids up at worst. There'd been a holiday party at the Galaxy Garrison, in particular, during his one year enrollment. He and Lance had argued violently over who would put the star on the top of the first-year dorm's Christmas tree, to the point where it spilled out into a very awesome (and totally unauthorized) drag race in one of the pilot simulators.

In the end, Pidge won.

Keith couldn't help but smile a little at the memory. Back then, he'd had no idea of what his future had held for him. He'd not yet began to sense the energy of the Blue Lion; he was just a delinquent student at the top of his class, along with his self-proclaimed rival. The Kerberos mission had only just begun a week or so prior, and—

His eyes shot open at the loud whirring sound, coming from the table. It was metal grinding on metal, and as he peered slowly from his hiding place, he could see sparks flying from in front of Bilgin's giant frame. Keith couldn't see what exactly the big Galra was working on, and getting close enough to peer over a shoulder was too risky. But he doubted that Bilgin was doing firing practice with newly-finished

İrem-assembled guns in a secret room such as this.

Whatever it was, the former (?) scientist was quite deep into working on it, concentration complete and hyper-focused on his personal task. Perhaps a bit too focused for someone who apparently had the part of his brain chopped out of his head resting inside a canister in the Med Bay. He was certainly focused enough that he didn't notice Keith behind him as he began to slowly slide towards the wall, inch by inch, stopping at the slightest turn of Bilgin's head from his project. It was an eternity before, finally, Keith was able to open the panel to the hallway and bolt as quietly and quickly as he could. Thankfully, Bilgin didn't notice and didn't pursue.

Of course, on the other hand Keith ran right into the Kommissar as he tried to sneak onto the elevator.

"…Sorry I'm late." Keith's ear twitched as the Kommissar's face turned a deeper shade of purple. "Explosive diarrhea."

That earned him several hard backhands that bruised swelled his cheek up but good.

Still worth it.

"Holy Zarkon?" Teori's eyes sparkled. "Oh, *yes*, I've devised a medical theory about His continued existence. You ever hear of B'schiqi fleas? They're a parasitic hive species from B'schiq that was accidentally unleashed on the universe by unsuspecting miners. In large numbers, the species is capable of eating through a Galra's brain stem and taking control of their dying host's entire nervous and motor system!"

Keith watched in bemused awe as Teori's fist clenched tightly, his other hand smacking down on a medical panel.

"So…you think, er, Zarkon's a *zombie*."

"A zombified puppet, yes! He is minimally alive and whatever consciousness that remains is forced to watch the fleas control His body!" Teori nodded. "I actually saw a hive sufferer back when I was in medical school. Back when I was passing as full-blooded."

“’Passing’?” *Again, with that word.* "Ok, what does that even mean?"

“Yeah. You never heard of it?” Teori pointed to his face. “A couple of us half-breeds passed as full-blooded Galra growing up. Some of us knew the truth, but...not all of us. Me, I practically looked like any normal Galra. I also had no idea my mother was Balmeran, but that’s the irony for you, isn’t it? I guess if you want a half-breed who can reasonably pass in normal society, that’s a species to mate with. I don’t look much different now than I did before Processing, just not as gray.”

Hunk’s friend and her brother had been Balmeran. Balmeran were, to the Galra, little better than a worker client species (and, if that stupid zooprax was being believed, sneaking enemies waiting to bomb everything in sight, Keith remembered with contempt). That Teori’s mother was probably thus a slave, with no choice and no freedom, was unsaid, but the frown that was forming on Teori’s face as he went into detail, said it for him.

Passing. Looking like a normal person, in normal society. Keith shifted his feet uncomfortably. *Like me, looking human on Earth.*

What if he’d looked less human, as he grew up?

“How…did you find out?”

“Accident.” Teori sighed. “A pretty stupid accident, actually. A patient was seizing up during a typical veinal reconstruction procedure and I sliced my finger open with the scalpel. The monitors picked up and registered my blood, and that was that. Once my shift was over I was informed my license was revoked, and the next *gün* my father and I were sent to the mines in Fescalinir for three *yıl*.”

“You mean quintessence mines.” Maybe he knew—no. Teori’s time had to have been before Kerberos, if his rank of lieutenant was an indication. “Isn’t that a life sentence?”

“Well, yeah.” Teori looked away, typing on the medical panel. “Usually. I only got out because there was a bad outbreak of Fesca lung rot, and I was the only one in the whole camp with medical training. Admiral Otac heard of me having helped the mines’ garrison and managed to broker a deal to get me on the *İrem*. It was painful, going through Processing, but I felt like it had to be worth it, yeah?”

“What…about your dad?” Keith swallowed, as he suddenly realized that particular detail had been left out of his story. “Did the admiral

help him?"

The typing on the panel stopped.

"…I…don't talk to my father anymore. We're not allowed contact with the outside, though the admiral did try to get me a line." Teori walked from the panel, and Keith felt his throat drop. "That's really all I can say about it. Oh, also, I need you to restock the rongeurs in those drawers…"

"***HAZIROL!***"

The Kommissar glared at everyone as she clicked her heels together, hard, at evening muster. Keith could – yet again – feel the glare turn particularly harsh when it looked in his direction.

"I've been hearing that you *yarıldı* have been trading scurrilous *rumors* among yourselves. So, I want to make something *very* clear," she hissed, showing her fangs. "Holy Zarkon is alive. Holy Zarkon will remain alive. Holy Zarkon is Eternal and Perfect, and those on this ship who might disbelieve this singular truth *do not* deserve to *live*. They can go *right* where that *idiot* Yazar went if they wish to profess such heresy! So, if you wish for such, go on and tell me right now you don't believe in Him, He who gave you the *superior* parts of your blood that you choose to *profane*!"

Her stare could wither a flower as she folded her hands behind her back, pacing from one end of the line to the other. No one said a word, even as she decked Hemsire, hard, in the face. Given the fun little insult the Kommissar threw at someone who was basically his sister, Keith could only wonder if her targeting him so abruptly wasn't a coincidence, as well as extra salt to the wounds.

If I didn't hate you before...

Keith, for his part, as much as he wanted to challenge this utter *wrongness*, was completely silent as her eyes went over him as if he were a stain on her boot. After a long silence, she stomped back to the center.

"As I *thought*. Too *scared* to repeat such things when confronted with

the *truth*! Such slinking in the darkness is typical behavior of the *inferior*, and the *malformed*, and the *retarded,"* she scoffed, superiority in her airs as she looked down at her troop with thinly disguised contempt. "*Pray* I never learn who started this talk; you're all *lucky* I don't jet the lot of you right now!"

As lucky as a stick shoved up my—

"**NOW! REPEAT AFTER ME!!**" She suddenly screamed, her voice ringing in Keith's ears. "**HOLY ZARKON IS ALIVE! HOLY ZARKON WILL REMAIN ALIVE! HOLY ZARKON IS ETERNAL AND PERFECT AND I, A HALF-BREED, AM LESS THAN NOTHING!!**"

The group spoke en masse, though Keith himself simply grumbled it.

"***LOUDER, YOU FILTHY, MANGY WHELP!!***"

That earned him a hard hit to the back of the head. Keith's eye and ear both twitched as he spat out the detestable phrase.

"Holy Zarkon is alive. Holy Zarkon will remain alive. Holy Zarkon is Eternal and Perfect…"

She forced them to repeat nearly twenty times, before she would dismiss them. As they turned to leave, Keith noticed the grumbling from others around him, and he couldn't help but smirk.

Still absolutely, 100 percent worth it.

Geçmiş

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

More days passed. Keith had no idea how many – just that they passed. Time felt like it was losing whatever meaning it had, slowly but surely. All that mattered was knowing how to make a gun – the Heretic – and knowing that he was a worthless little beast, according to the Kommissar. He got up in the morning, ate, worked, looked for more secret spots on the ship, got yelled at multiple times during muster, and went to bed. That was his life, now.

Granted, and maybe a little ironically, Keith was beginning to understand the meaning of those strange Galra words that those on the *İrem* used to denote the passage of time, along with some of the words of the normal Galra script outside of his fake name, and of course Galra numbers. It took some more getting used to than the system used by Coran and Allura when they awoke, and that he'd not really used much to begin with.

Yıl and *gün* were the easiest to figure out – they were the equivalent to year and day for the Galra. The GESS *İrem*, then, had been around for about thirteen years, give or take. *Gün* could also be said *gündüz*, though not anywhere near as often, and usually just by Ağla, and *günler* was for multiple days. *Hafta* had been next – that was the Galra week. He'd heard nothing of minutes or hours – or at least, if he had, it was not enough to commit it to memory.

Not yet, at least, at the rate he was going. The only way he'd had a clue that a significant amount of time had passed was when he caught himself looking in one of the bathroom mirrors one evening by pure chance. He stared at the emaciated, bright-eyed figure in the mirror with the mussed fur-hair on his head – his bangs went beyond his fangs and down to his chin. The rest of the strands went down beyond his collarbone, curling at the tips.

Ağla offered to chop his hair off with a knife when he brought it up, as she did for anyone who asked. They'd had a proper barber once, a blue sash who actually had training in cutting and styling the fur on a Galra's body, but a *yıl* ago he'd died of what was determined to be natural causes. 'Natural', yet he had been Ağla's age when he'd suddenly sickened and passed.

Keith declined, at least for the present. His hair was his measuring stick, after all. With how long his hair was, he realized that, if Galra hair grew with similar speed to human hair, he'd had to have been on the ship for weeks. For at least a month – maybe more than a month. *Several* months.

Quiznak.

Still, he had to keep hope up. It was all he had. Hope that he'd find a way to get off, and then return to his team. Surely, they were worried about him. Surely, they hadn't given up on him.

Surely…

One evening soon after his unfortunate realization, as muster began, the Kommissar abruptly walked in, hands behind her back.

"Work output and the quota deadlines that have actually been met have been insultingly low on the ship as of late," she announced. "And it appears, even now, even after I reminded you about minding your tongues, and after I *squashed* those blasphemous rumors and *lies* when you idiots started spouting them—"

Sure you did, lady. Keith allowed his eyes to roll, just a little, while the Kommissar wasn't looking. *Sure you did.*

"—*some* of you *yarıldı* and *sakatladı* have forgotten a few *facts* regarding the reasons you are lucky to be here! So, with that in mind, I have decided to show you an educational *zooprax* once again!"

The few groans that Keith could pick up were suddenly silenced by the Kommissar's glare.

"And I will be showing it *right NOW*!" The sound of the cracking whip sent everyone scurrying and hurrying. "**EVERYONE TO THE ODEON! GO! GO! *GO*!!**"

"This way, Kılıç!" He was suddenly grabbed by a purple sash with glassy, dark yellow eyes in the fracas. Oh, right, that was— "C'mon, *I'm* supposed to be the blind one here!"

Soon enough, he was stuffed into the elevator, and then marched

single file, marching almost in nervous rhythm, into the amphitheater. Purple sashes sat in front as everyone slithered in; blue sashes sat in back. The guards lined the ends of ever other row. Only the navigators were absent. Keith found himself roughly separated from the blind Galra once he entered, and shoved into a random row by the Kommissar.

"Sit *here*, Kılıç, you little whelping bug." Once she could tell everyone was seated, she raised her voice. "*NOW*! You are *all* to stay in your seats. No bathroom break, no eating or drinking during the zoo, *nothing*! And if I hear *any* ridiculous *quips* or funny *jokes*—" she must have been referring to Sarışın with those ones, Keith thought, "–or *booing* during this presentation, I will find each and every one of you doing it and turn your purple hides *green*!"

With that, the lights were dimmed, and a logo appeared on the holographic screen. It was a painting of a highly-stylized Black Lion on a mountain, looking at a sunrise to its left, stylized stars on its right, and large block Galra text underneath in bright yellow. Inspiring music blared through the room, causing the theater to shake.

"***C.P.P. (ÇİÇEKÇİ PRAX PRODUCTIONS) PRESENTS.***" A smooth-voiced announcer spoke as the title card came up, reading out most of what was on the screen for Keith. Good thing, he only could figure out one or two words of the Galra script. "***WHAT MAKES A GOOD GALRA: INDUSTRY.***"

The title card lingered, with very happy-sounding music, before fading to black, then fading to a background of stars and ships. Everyone around Keith, meanwhile, was dead silent.

"***The Galra Empire.***" The announcer continued. "***It is no secret that members of the Galra race are physically, intellectually, and otherwise factually superior to all other species. All one needs to present for proof is the extensive network of planets and galaxies that Zarkon, our Eternal and Holy Emperor, has taken under his wings and helped to raise up to the level of being properly civilized. We are the envy of countless races across the stars, who can only dream to be anything like us. However, what others don't know is that it took a lot of hard work and sacrifice over the centuries, to get to the point where we are now.***"

Keith squirmed in his seat at the pictures. Fields and columns of hydroponically-grown plants swaying in dunes of white sands, with several workers picking succulent fruits and flowers into floating

cubes. Happy miners, working hard to harvest quintessence with state-of-the-art, glowing tools. There were even Druids, quietly sitting in a coven circle, seemingly casting benevolent spells which…actually, Keith had no clue what they were doing, they were clearly meant to look 'good' and 'industrious'. Somehow.

All of it punctuated with chipper music.

"***And we must still continue to be industrious and hard-working, as our enemies never rest.***" The music turned sinister, as the peaceful scenes were changed into scenes of fire, destruction, and space dust. "***Even now, as we speak, these enemies desire to recreate the most powerful weapon in the universe: Voltron.***"

There was a murmur among the crew at this, and Keith felt his blood go cold at the picture. It was of a formed Voltron, albeit an artist's rendering, followed by footage of explosions, desolate fields and ruined cities.

"***Corrupt, self-proclaimed 'Paladins' of other species have, throughout history, banded together to try and take control of the mighty Lion components for personal power, and their own, selfish gain, when we weren't looking.***"

Footage of aliens sneaking around, holding weaponry. One of them was a Balmeran (a slave species constantly taken advantage of, of course), dressed in what looked like advanced armor they couldn't in actuality wear, who threw a bomb it couldn't possibly know how to make in real life. There was an explosion, with families trying to flee, only to be shot in the back. Then, in the next scene the Balmeran was grabbing a baby from its mother's arms, eyes wide and teeth bared. Then it was opening its mouth, bringing the crying creature up with its hands, and then—

No. No, no, no.

Keith shut his eyes, shrinking further into his seat, feeling himself shake, just slightly, as he heard a growl, and a *crunch*, and a satisfied *slurp*, in the space equivalent of surround sound. He felt like he was going to be sick. There was a quiet whimper near him, and a few gasps, and it didn't make him feel any better as he realized just what path this film was going down when it came to the Paladins.

When it came to someone like *him*, the Red Paladin.

"***They are monsters, savages with no morals or restraint, who only***

wish to sow discontent and spread chaos."

When he opened his eyes again, there was more fire, and the remains of a baby blanket in the forefront, followed by footage of Galra screaming in terror as the silhouette of Voltron rose menacingly on the horizon, causing more explosions. This was punctured with a slow pan of a field full of unmoving Galra bodies, crops burnt and houses ruined.

"***They desire to steal away the birthright of our Emperor, deprive the universe of peace, and dilute the fierce fighting spirit of the Galra people. Ours, as a united people, is a never-ending battle to prevent this terrible scenario from coming to pass…***"

That was when Keith tuned out completely. His ears folded back as far as they could, his eyes were shut. He wasn't listening. He wasn't going to listen to this horrible drivel. He was going to think about his friends, his team, back on the Castle, throwing space goo at each other, training, talking to their Lions, watching Pidge work on machinery, needling Lance when he hit on Allura. And Shiro, watching as everything unfolded, with Keith trying to figure out what the older pilot – the leader – was thinking when he looked at the others.

None of this felt right. None of this *was* right. It was all lies, terrible lies. And yet judging by the reactions, everyone was *falling* for it.

He was only brought back to reality when he felt an elbow jab his side.

"Psst, look, there's Bilgin! Amazing." The whisper could barely be heard by Keith over the narrator's dialogue. Which was probably the point, to keep the Kommissar from hearing them speak. "This film's from ten *yıl* ago. Back when Bilgin had all his brain…"

"***…new development,***" Keith looked up at the screen to see Bilgin on the screen. A younger Bilgin, with neat hair and a sane smile. In his beefy hand was a gun, which he kindly demonstrated to the film crew, by shooting straight through an armored dummy. "***The Heretic is a mid-sized weapon, made by experienced weapon specialists. Though it lacks the quint capacity of the current regular-issue weapons of the military, its stimulated amplification factor is far stronger. Thus, even less supply, the Heretic can discharge a laser strong enough to shoot through the strongest plate-armor that our enemies wear, making it a sure-fire deadly addition to the arsenal of peace and an***

excellent secondary laser-arm for our troops…"

After this, Keith drifted back into not paying attention, until the lights went back up and the Kommissar yelled at everyone to stuff their fat holes with food, in her usual lovely manner. Everyone was silent, tense, as they made their way to the elevator and ultimately, the Mess Hall. Whatever the real intention of the Kommissar, whatever had been on the rest of the crew's minds before she pulled out the zooprax on them, the trick, it seemed, had worked on just about everyone, Keith included.

It wasn't true. They…the Paladins. They weren't corrupt. They weren't monsters. They were *themselves*. They were trying to save the universe from destruction. The very destruction the zooprax claimed they caused.

It wasn't true. It *wasn't*—

"Hey, Kılıç." A blue sash girl – Homurtu, he was pretty sure – pat him on the back. "I saw you get scared when the film mentioned Voltron."

"Oh." Keith gulped. "About that—"

"Hey, no problem. We all heard the bedtime stories as kids." In spite of the reassuring words, there was worry in Homurtu's expression. "I mean, yeah, nowadays we know it's real, and Zarkon's gotta fight and stuff. And…yeah, the stuff in the film is…is nuts. But it's not like enemy Paladins are going to know *we're* here, yeah?"

Keith looked away at this.

"I mean…He wouldn't let the *wrong* Paladins win, right?" Who was *she* trying to convince? "U-um. Anyways. So Bilgin was pretty handsome back in the day, wasn't he…?"

It had been bad enough to realize that the crew didn't just know of Voltron – it made it even worse to realize they were terrified of it, of the Paladins. Of anyone not on Zarkon's side. Did they think that, as those who accepted looking and being Galra (however they did that, he still hadn't figured that part out even after all this time, and it annoyed him), that being thrown to the Empire's enemies would be a

worse fate?

Maybe they did, after years of being made to believe it. Being forced to embrace it, when they had no other alternative. It was terrifying to see it in action – otherwise reasonable people, believing they were less than nothing, grabbing the only hand that could even pull them up – and in return, they were told lies, made to feel ashamed of who they were, and forced to hide how they felt about what had happened to them. Keith had to wonder if that Admiral Otac was the real monster – or if everyone's words about him being kind had any grain of truth in them. Regardless of the answer, he was just as much a victim of the ridiculousness as any of them.

That said, as he mused over his own situation, he was glad he had never mentioned anything about his true self and background, or only gave vague insinuations about his real identity. He doubted that he'd be welcomed so much on the ship anymore the moment the little nugget about his connection to Voltron had slipped from him. Being an enemy. A murderer. A *monster*. That's what they no doubt would have seen Keith the Paladin as - a figure to despise and mistrust, no matter his good intentions. He would have to keep his secret, then, and hope that those on board would never guess the truth.

Speaking of which. Speaking of guessing.

He was at breakfast one day with Oğul soon after that wonderfully uncomfortable zooprax, having Ağla's absolutely delicious breakfast soup once more while Oğul kept guessing his training location, when he noticed Oğul's hands. The claws on his gloves had been ripped off, making them fingerless, much like Keith's.

"Oh, hey." Keith pointed. "When did you do that?"

"This?" Oğul looked at his hands. "Oh, uh, I did it couple weeks ago. On a compulsion, its no big de—"

"Oğul?"

That was when another blue sash slid towards their table, eyes wide.

"Hey, Oğul." He learned in, furtively whispering. "Is it true? Are we headed towards…towards *Helvicta*?"

"Hm?" Oğul frowned. "What kind of a question is that?"

"C'mon, man." The blue sash became more insistent. "That's where

we're going, isn't it? We're going to Helvicta territory! Everyone's talking about it and—"

"Hatmi." Oğul's voice became sharp. "You *know* I'm not allowed to divulge any information about our navigational course or any location we may be heading towards. If you keep asking you're going to get into trouble."

"But…I…all right..."

The blue sash's shoulder's sagged, and he gave a nod as he slunk off. Keith watched him sink back into the part-Galra morass, before looking back at Oğul.

"What's Helvicta?"

"Hm?" Oğul gave Keith a slight glare. "Kılıç, I already *said*—"

"I just want to know what it *is*." Keith felt a slight growl in his throat. "I keep hearing about it. The crew's been whispering about it for days, which means they know what it is. You don't have to break military protocol to just tell me what it is, right?"

After a long moment, Oğul opened his mouth – and ate another bite of food.

"…Thanks." Keith's growl didn't dissipate as he stabbed his own utensil into a piece of meat. "For—"

"Look, classified or not, I *don't* like talking about it, Kılıç." Oğul's eyes flashed. "So just drop it for right now, ok?"

"...*Why*?"

"Just." Oğul's tone became icy. "*Drop* it."

The two continued to stare at one another, warily, until they went their separate ways for their work shift. Even as Keith made his way to the elevator, he could feel Oğul's glare on him.

So, then, Helvicta wasn't a crew member's name, real or fake. It was a location name. If Keith had any means of contacting the other

Paladins, that would be excellent information to help them narrow down where he was. At the same time, the name still didn't sound like anything mentioned by Coran or Allura previously, and he knew he had to figure out more about its location. Someone had to know more about it, and be willing to speak of it to him.

As it turned out, it didn't take much effort at all.

"Oğul didn't want to tell you?" Keith had been invited to watch Ağla and Sarışın play a game in one of the hidden rooms, as Hemşire officiated to proceedings. "I suppose that it's not surprising. The Helvicta arrangement has always been a point of contention between for him, especially in regards to the Admiral. Ah, Sarışın, your move."

"I know, I know." Sarışın stared at the board. It was much like chess, if chess had twice the number of parts, the rules were completely rewritten, and the pieces were designed to bite and snarl at an opponent's fingers if they tried to capture them. "Ok, 8 to 51."

"All right, 3 to—*ow*!— 36." A pawn nipped Ağla's thumb. "One up!"

"C'mon, guys." Keith frowned. "What is it? Everyone seems to know but me."

"Which is *really* surprising, all things considered!" Sarışın stared at the board, rubbing her chin. "Let me guess, no one in Processing mentioned them either."

"Uh, no, I wasn't told..."

"Ah, ow." Ağla sucked on her bleeding finger. "Helvicta is a system in the heart of İlçeler Nebula. Its officially under the control of the Galra Empire. As most are…sort of. Sarışın, dear, what level of aggression did you put these things on, I'm *bleeding*!"

"They are on max. I'm in this to win." Sarışın winced, then grinned maniacally as a larger piece proceeded to gnaw on her stump. "Victory or bandages! *Bwahaha*!"

"Sort of? What d—" Keith backed away slightly from the board, as one of the pieces tried to nip his nose off. "*Quiznak*! Are these living things!?"

"Heheheh, *quiznak*? Wow." Sarışın wriggled her stump, the piece growling as it held on tenaciously. "Haven't heard *that* one in *yıl*. My great-*grandma* used it, Kılıç, you loser!"

“Er,” Hemşire intervened at this, pulling on the piece until if finally let go, leaving a sizable bit mark on Sarışın. “What Ağla means to say is, the system is overseen by…others. Individuals in a fleet not of the Galra Empire. Individuals who are…not necessarily Galra themselves.”

Keith’s ears went up at this.

“You mean—”

“Its the largest non-imperial fleet in the known universe. Now 18 to 19.” Ağla made her move. “The Helvicta Corsairs. Some of us would rather face an unsupervised Voltron than an angry corsair!”

“Voltro—“

No, don’t say that.

“Wait, we’re going into *pirate* territory?”

“Hey!” Sarışın held up her bleeding stump. “As your superior with access to sensitive information, I cannot confirm or deny whether we are going into pirate territory, ok? But…for the record I can say *maybe*.”

“…*Why*?”

“It’s not *that* big a deal.” Sarışın went to move her next piece. “Well, ok, it *sort of* is. Admiral Otac and the Helvicta Corsairs are working together.”

There was a long silence, save for the piece Sarışın was capturing latching onto her sash.

“Wait, like…” Keith rubbed his temples. “Allies? I would have thought the Galra would try to destroy pirates and...criminals and stuff, especially if they're as strong as you say they are."

“Ha! That’s what they *used* to do.” Sarışın poked at the piece gnawing her clothing. “When the military had the resources to actually *do* that kind of stuff and the Druids weren’t…well. Being *Druids*.”

“We…um.” Ağla rubbed her hands together, looking down almost ashamedly. “Admiral Otac doesn’t get much for the Inclusivity Initiative. He tries to, really, but it doesn’t always work out. So…he made a deal with the Helvicta Corsairs when the *İrem* was first being built. Got them commissioned for shipping work, to make it legal on

an official level."

"They give us the supplies and items we need and we give them a… small percentage of what we have." Keith looked at the group as they, save Sarışın, looked away from him. "Primarily weaponry, a few pieces of advanced technology and robotics and…some basic intel. Enough to keep the Empire's eye off their fleet's more…illicit activities."

"Psh, what're *you* all looking so embarrassed about?" Sarışın huffed. "We do what we have to do. It's not like Holy Zarkon actually pays attention to *us*."

That caused Keith to look at Sarışın, eyes widened.

"What? The only reason this ship even exists is because the Admiral is the only one who realized you half-breeds and us cripples might actually be *useful* to the Empire as more than just target practice and freak shows." Sarışın frowned. "Well, that and he ripped his eyeball out and let the Emperor stomp on it, but you get my point, don't you, kiddo?"

"I…" Keith looked down, thinking about Sarışın's words. About the stories he'd heard on the ship from those he'd spoken to. "Right."

"Kılıç?" Finally, Ağla spoke. "I…I really can't lie, I'm actually surprised you didn't know about the Helvicta Corsairs at all. Not even in Processing. That's just so strange!"

She moved her piece to take what looked like a general on Sarışın's side.

"That's who helps Process us. That's why we have *blue* blood now, don't you remember seeing them?"

Blue…blood…!?

"*Hey!*" Before Keith could process a proper response, Sarışın let out a shout. "You didn't call your move! Technical foul! I get a piece back! *Boooooo!!*"

Helvicta Corsairs.

Keith staggered out of the elevator, allowing himself to at last lean against a wall, staring at the floor all the while. He could feel his tail wagging hard, excitedly. Much as his heart was pounding.

That's why we have blue blood now, don't you remember seeing them?

His fists clenched. Things were finally – *finally* – starting to come together.

I was on a strange ship with blue quintessence. We thought it was a derelict ship, orbiting a planet where a mine was. Where we thought the Galra was. The crew…wasn't fully Galra.

At least he hoped they weren't. But everything made sense, didn't it? That ship had to be a pirate ship. A Helvicta Corsair ship. A ship cobbled together from pieces of other ships—

Did…they Scotch tape this ship together or something?

"……Oh."

Not even the deck layouts were being consistent for him, he realized.

"My."

This ship, with its ridiculous patterns and mishmash of internal workings.

"***God!***"

Keith could feel his eyes bug out as further realization suddenly smashed him on the side of the head like a sledgehammer. The admiral of the *İrem*, teaming up with pirates, getting supplies, and blue quintessence, which resulted in blue blood in those who were part-Galra. The junk ship, made of parts from other ships, while the *İrem* had the patchwork of multiple ships and even concrete within its various walls, with multiple hiding areas.

Areas made from *other ships* used to build the *İrem*.

Why hadn't he connected the dots before!?

"Kılıç."

What the *quiznak* was wrong with him!? Stupid, stupid—

"Kılıç!"

He didn't even realize he'd been violently banging his head against the wall.

"*Hey*!" Once Keith's focus came back, he found himself staring right at Oğul, who was dragging him up from the floor and hissing at him. Four large slash marks dripped blue blood from his cheeks. "Get up, Kommissar's on the floor!"

Keith let out his own frustrated hiss, as he felt warmth on the back of his head. No, it wasn't Oğul's hands holding it. Oğul's hands were clearly dragging him by the shoulders, right around his scruff, essentially rendering him immobile.

"Come on, you idiot." Though Keith still tried to struggle as Oğul tossed him into an opening panel. "Get in here!"

Keith let out a gasp as his scruff was freed, and he found himself stumbling into a large, circular room. With a slam of the panel, Oğul closed the room up.

"Be quiet." Oğul's tone indicated that he'd brook no resistance. Indeed, as Keith opened his mouth to protest, Oğul's hand was wrapped tightly around his mouth. "Not a single word!"

Keith was tempted to bite. Very, very tempted. Before he could act on it, however, he heard the faint echo of heels clacking in the hallway beyond. A faint march, punching out an ominous rhythm as the *clack, clack, clack* became louder with each second.

Then, it abruptly stopped, right in front of the opening panel of the room.

Keith was certain his breathing was too loud. It was too quiet. She was too quiet. She could hear them. She was going to find them.

The clacking resumed, this time getting fainter and fainter, in the other direction. Oğul's paw remained affixed to Keith's mouth for quite some time after the sound had disappeared, regardless.

"There." The hold was finally released, and Keith sucked in a deep, relieving breath. "Shouldn't you know better by now than to screw around out in the open after curfew?"

"I wasn't—"

Keith let out a grumble as he brought his claws up, only to stop as he

realized the claws on his hand were covered in drying blood. He looked up at the claw marks on Oğul's face, his own complaints about the situation drying out just as fast.

"…Sorry."

"Don't be sorry," The other sighed. "I can get this fixed easily enough. Just be smart next time and not bang your head out in the open like you were."

A pause.

"Why *were* you banging your head, anyways?"

Keith bit his lower lip at this.

"…Pirates."

Oğul's eyes narrowed.

"Of course, someone told you." For a moment, as Oğul brought his hands to his head and groaned, he actually sounded like a normal teenager. "Even though it's *supposed* to be classified. Does *everyone* have to know everything about that?!"

"Considering I had no idea that was even a thing? I think it would be a bit important to know we're being propped up by third parties before being brought on board, *commander*."

We're? Keith stopped himself. When did Keith lump himself in with this crew?

Oğul's eyes brightened, ever so slightly, as he glared at Keith.

"Do you really think I agree with it?"

"Well," Keith shrugged. "My sources say you don't, and I doubt they'd lie about something like pirates to begin with."

"*Ha*," The other scoffed. "They're right. It's a disgrace. A Galra admiral depending on thieves and murderers. Isn't it rich?"

Nope. Not at all, right, Nyma and Rolo?

Keith knew better than to say that out loud, though.

"…Its only because of an accident, you know." Oğul flopped on his

back, staring up at the ceiling. “Your ‘sources’ tell you that?”

“No, that didn’t come up.” Sarışın was too busy trying to argue about how she’d actually won because of a technical rule, and Ağla was too busy bleeding from her fingers and trying to keep them from the hungry tongues of the game pieces. “But since I know about the pirates now, you should just come clean with it anyways. What happened?”

“Heh.” Oğul closed his eyes. “A mining accident before most of us were born. Well, except Sarışın, but Sarışın’s older than most Galra in general. Some prisoners found an unstable quintessence lode during a tectonic shift on one of the planetary operations overseen by the admiral within the Helvicta system.”

“Mining.” Slowly, Keith also settled onto his back, looking over at Oğul as he spoke. “Figures, huh?”

“Yeah. When the military unburied the mining team, they found the survivors swimming in a pool of blue, with several of them showing mutated Galra parts. Other miners that helped with the rescue started turning, too, if they didn’t outright die from the radiation. Once that happened…”

There was a silence.

“The blue quintessence that could be mined on those planets – really most of the planetary systems within the İlçeler - turned out to be highly radioactive, and looked to be much more difficult for the druids to refine to an acceptable level for the emperor. So, the admiral pulled out and left the miners to their fate. Those miners managed to take over the mines, and then the planets in Helvicta. They formed the core of the Helvicta Corsairs.”

Radioactive. Radioactive items tend to be heated. Possibly hot enough to burn through my armor...

“How’d the admiral get tangled up with them again, then?”

“Me.” Oğul’s tone took ok a small hint of bitterness. “*I* was born, and someone found out my mother wasn’t Galra. Being a member of a noble family, I was taken to be executed by the emperor himself…and he...intervened.”

Keith’s head instantly flipped over to look at Oğul, eyes slightly widened. Someone found out his mother was not Galra. Which meant

his father *was* Galra. And the reason why the admiral would take such an interest in some random half-breed child, even if he was from a noble family, and a military family with a long tradition, was...? Did Admiral Otac *know* Oğul's father, or—

Wait. Keith's eyes widened even more, once a more simpler alternative presented itself. Really, why would Admiral Otac go to those lengths for a kid? Unless, of course, that kid was...oh.

Oh.

Suddenly, it made sense, and also, at the same time, had gotten *awkward*.

"…So *that's* why you were one of the first ones on this ship." So much for hoping that Keith's own parentless back story might cheer him up a little bit. "Uh. So. Yeah."

"Yeah." Oğul rolled away from him, tail thumping angrily on the floor. "Once he realized the use the blue quintessence could have to *save* me, that was when he swayed the emperor. Struck the deal with the corsairs because *Holy* Zarkon didn't really care about how he carried things out otherwise. And, after I got Processed, I've been here ever since."

"And you know all those different military academies..."

"I..." The tail thumping lessened. "I always wanted to be in the military, follow in my family's tradition. It's what my family does, my ancestors were all high-ranking when they died. Ever since I could walk, I was told that serving was the highest duty of all Galra throughout the universe, and...that as nobles...that duty was inevitable. To not serve was a disgrace. But…I didn't want it like this. Not like this and...not as…*this*."

Keith watched, as Oğul stayed rolled away from him, his legs rolling up towards his chest.

"*You* get it, right?" Keith couldn't ignore the slight waviness which crept into his senior officer's voice. "You went to military. You were trained in academy somewhere. I still don't know where, but you got to *go*, where I only got to read and hear about it. You could *pass*, you could pretend, *just* long enough, and you could do those things I didn't get to do. You're…so *lucky*."

Keith recoiled, just slightly, as if Oğul's words had punched him in the

stomach. That hurt. Not because Oğul was being mean, but because he knew Oğul was, in a sense, right. He'd lived his whole life on Earth, that ignorant planet (ah, how he *missed* it, just a little, even *now*) with little realization of just what truly lay beyond the borders of the solar system. Back when Keith had defied the Galaxy Garrison and their ridiculous claim of pilot error during the Kerberos mission, even he had to admit that he'd not anticipated the depth of what he was getting himself – and ultimately everyone else – into.

Keith never really suspected, until he'd left Earth, that he'd been anything other than a human, and he certainly was never hunted or despised for it. His friends had, also, eventually accepted him, on some level, when they learned of it. Shiro included, no matter his own uncertainty of it now. Even Allura came to apologize for seeing him as anything other than just *Keith*, and she had all the reason to distrust him, much as it had hurt him.

He still endured. How lucky he'd been, compared to others like him, and those on the *İrem* with him now.

How *free*.

All of these revelations were giving him a headache, along with an ache in the pit of his stomach.

"…You're not missing much." Keith's mumbling after such a long silence elicited a choking snort from Oğul. "Seriously. It's like having a dozen Kommissars up your butt trying to order you around. You still have a curfew and chores and everything. At least it was like that at my place."

"I…still wouldn't have minded it."

"If you met Iverson, you'd change your mind." Keith stretched. "I'm not telling you where he's stationed, by the way. You still have to guess, remember?"

"…Ha." Oğul's voice cracked. "Right. You could be here all night with *me* guessing, you know. Got all the schools and training spots I'll never attend stored up in here in my brain."

"Psh." Keith rolled his eyes, or tried to. He was never sure if Galra eyes could roll like human ones. "Like I care. We're hiding from the Kommissar anyways."

"…Good point." That at least got a chuckle from the other, and his tail

wagging may have become more relaxed. “Good point.”

The next while was Oğul trying to guess where Keith received his training. Dhensi. Phlownette. The Fifth Annex. Words Keith could barely pronounce, and worlds he’d never heard of before. They were all wrong, of course. But at least it wasn’t quite so awkward.

At least the other could get his mind off the truth of his situation. No —of their situation. Keith felt his stomach churn as he realized he couldn’t entirely divorce himself from what was all around him.

He was, after all, one of them now.

Keith didn’t know when Oğul started to drift off, or what time it was when he carefully picked the other up to bring back to the capsules. It was late enough that he would be lucky to get a few hours of sleep at best, which wasn’t going to be helpful with regards to the headache. Carefully, he put Oğul into…well, what he hoped as his bed, before shuffling back to capsule 49.

“Kılıç.”

He froze when he heard the words. Felt the gentle, spindly fingers clench his shoulder.

“You should get to bed, dear Kılıç.” Dansçı’s words whispered into the wind. “We have both been spending too much time with our beloved friends tonight, haven’t we?”

Keith didn’t respond. He, instead, frantically shrugged off her hand and dove into her capsule, quickly closing the panel behind him.

Chapter End Notes

ATTN:
File: Kılıç has been declassified.

Hayalperest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was nothing.

Keith just found himself in black, walking like he was on a wheel. He tried to walk, talk, do something else other than walk in a circle, but every time he tried, he just kept repeating the same motions. Over and over and over, no matter what he tried to do. The same motions. The same words, echoing in his head.

He was never going to get out.

He was never going to get out.

He was never going to get out.

He was never going to get out.

*He was never going to***BEEEEEEEEP** ***BEEEEEEEEPP****

The alarm jerked him out of sleep, and Keith found himself face down on his pillow, his sheet haphazardly tangled around him. The beeping continued, as the panel covering his capsule slid open.

"**GOOD MORNING.**" A loud automated voice echoed through the hallway, as the sound of skittering feet accompanied it. "**PLEASE PROCEED TO THE DECK 2 BOW FOR MORNING MUSTER.**"

Another day, another day, Keith moaned, his lack of sleep from the previous night weighing on his eyeballs, as he slid out of his capsule. His head thumped in time with his heartbeat as his headache from the previous evening continued unabated. *Yeah, I get it.*

"Morning, Kılıç."

"Morning!"

"Yo, Akbaş."

Akbaş, a purple sash from Lwatchip. The blind one from the educational zooprax.

Keith mumbled to each Galra, half-blood, half-bodied, and otherwise, of all colors and shades of purple, who greeted him as he slouched his way to the elevator. On occasion, he punctuated the greeting with a raised hand. At this point, he knew most of the individuals getting on the elevator which him.

It was a slightly unnerving thought, as he tried to recall his teammates in the Castle of Lions, and of the Red Lion, even as he spoke to these fellow misfits. He could still visualize them and hear their voices clearly, for the moment. Who knew how long that would last, though. One day the faces would blur, the sounds would fade, the colors which punctuated the insides of Castle's rooms and halls would dim, until they were all unrecognizable to him.

The longer he stayed, he knew, the more remote the likelihood of being rescued truly became.

"Hey, Mimar." A purple sash from a sector near Arus; one leg. Then, to a blue sash from Satellite 3z84-44-s, part Detric. "Morning, Çiftçi."

"Good morning, dear Kılıç."

"Hi—"

Keith froze as he realized who it was speaking to him, and for the moment his headache was forgotten. In response, Dansçı simply smiled at him.

"I *do* hope you will have a wonderful day, dear Kılıç." She tilted her head, motioning towards the elevator. "I believe we should get going, you know."

He slowly backed away into the elevator, to which Dansçı simply stepped in right behind him, sequestering herself right next to him. Still looking at him. Still smiling. Still treating him like the reason she got up in the morning, every morning, even though he'd barely spoken to her in the last…however long it had been since he'd deigned to speak to her or associate with her directly…before last night.

And that was when horror hit him.

Wait…does Dansçı like *me…!?*

“I noticed you got Dansçı’s attention, huh?” An irritated Keith munched on the (still incredibly *delicious*) food as a purple sash chirped at him, misshapen eyes squinting at him. “You’re sure lucky to have *that*, huh? Heheh.”

“Mm.” *Slurrrrrp.* The ever-reliable soup helped his headache, at least. “I don’t want to talk about it, Aptal.”

I know you’re not half-Drule…

“She’s going to keep hounding you, you know.” The other purple sash ignored Keith’s reticence and kept talking. “She’s done that ever since she came on board, to every newbie. Tries to be friends and never lets up until you hurt her precious feelings on her boyfriend back home or whatever. You know, they *say* that she’s on the ship because Bilgin lost his mind, but I think it’s the opposite. I think she’s the one that—“

A very large and beefy paw slammed down on the table, right next to Aptal. A second paw dragged him right up into the air, tossing them across the room.

“*DON’T!*” With a roar, Bilgin proceeded to charge at the poor idiot and hit him with several devastating, bone-crunching hits. “***TALK!! ABOUT!! MY!! SISTER!!***”

Keith watched, feeling his headache return as he watched the giant pummel his victim. Nearby, he spotted Dansçı as she watched as well. She stared at her brother’s actions, before what looked like the ship’s entire guard her eyes slowly turned to Keith.

She smiled at him again, and Keith immediately resumed looking back down at his food, doing his best to not meet her eyes.

“You should talk to her.”

“Huh?”

Keith leaned back to look at the one talking to him, perplexed. For the first time, he was on the Polishing and Buffing Station – a small, stuffy room accessible through a panel in Gun Assembly. Maybe he was

trustworthy enough to handle making Galra weapons shiny. Or the Kommissar was hoping he would snap and drink alien bleach like Lēkhaka. Anything was possible with her.

It wasn't helping his headache, and he was starting to get dizzy from the chemicals besides.

"What?"

"Dansçı." The one speaking to him – Geçit, he was pretty sure – shrugged. "Take your lumps sooner rather than later, you know? She's kind of nuts, but Bilgin will only beat you up once she decides she doesn't like you anymore. Then, it can just be awkward between you guys forever."

Keith frowned, his eyes narrowing.

"Why would I want to make things *worse* for me on this ship?"

"Well, you can keep ignoring her and then have her get upset *that* way." Keith felt a growl in his throat as Geçit cheerfully continued. "Then Bilgin will beat you up anyways!"

Keith leaned back, rubbing his temples, the growl leaving his mouth. So, then, his options were to either to speak to Dansçı, hurt her feelings at some point and be beaten up by her brother, or not speak to Dansçı, hurt her feelings at some point and be beaten up by her brother. Thus, he can be beaten up sooner, or later.

Just my luck.

He'd have to confront her in any case.

He just had no idea when it would be, or how.

"Thanks for the advice."

"No problem!" Geçit went back to his polishing. "So, did you hear, by the way? Sarışın's got a project she's working on, but she's not letting anyone in on it. She's even said no more zooprax nights until she's completed it!..."

He was still looking for a way out of the situation, even now. Still peeking into panels, sneaking around after curfew. The *İrem* had dozens of hiding spots and hidden rooms – some very clearly inhabited by other crew members during the evenings and nights, others once used but then abandoned, still others never even touched – that he'd only begun to find.

Pidge had underestimated just how many ships could be meshed together to make a junk ship. The core was Galra, but then when you put together the dozens of different styles, panels, alcoves, and entire ship sections from other structures added on – some sections connecting to even more remote hiding places? If he intended on searching every nook and cranny – which, naturally, he did – for that elusive road to freedom, he still have many months' worth of searching rooms within rooms.

If a crewmember caught him, and invited him in, then fine, he'd go along with it, discover where they sequestered themselves, and do his best to mark it off his increasingly confused mental list of which room was checked and where on the ship it was. If he was alone, all the better to keep searching without interference.

So far, the Kommissar – and the guards – hadn't caught him again for a violation since that first evening, his evening with the twins aside. He intended to keep it that way. He kept himself as quiet as he could, well aware of the Galra's enhanced hearing at that point. He could hear the faint voices of his fellow crewmembers during their down time, and the creating and groaning of the inner workings of the ship in their confused, mangled glory. There seemed to be no sign of anyone near him, though.

"Good evening."

Yet even then he didn't hear Dansçı walking behind him. He let out a strangled yelp as she, once more, brought her hand on her shoulder.

"Dear Kılıç." Her face was suddenly right next to his, her chin on his shoulder, her words whispering into his ear. "Might you be amenable to spending a few moments with me? There is something I wish to speak to you about. It is, for me, very important."

Keith slowly turned, looking at Dansçı. He probably looked like deer in headlights. He didn't care.

"Don't be afraid." Her other hand went to touch his face, and it took whatever willpower Keith could cobble together to not just recoil. "I

just want to dance with you. Will you let me?"

Keith opened his mouth to try and decline. To say no thank you, move on, and prepare for his probably-inevitable beating from Bilgin. His voice, however, decided to fail him at that precise moment, and, of course, Dansçı took his silence for acquiescence.

"This way." She gently began to pull him, which elicited a growl. "Oh, don't be like that. The Kommissar will be on this floor any moment, you know. Surely you can hear her?"

What—*quiznak—!*

He genuinely didn't know if the Kommissar was coming, of if Dansçı had better hearing than he on that end. Nor could he take the chance that Dansçı wasn't just lying to get him alone with her to…*dance*? Was she being literal, or…*or*…

What was she *planning* with him?

"Here." Her grip was surprisingly strong as she pressed a panel, revealing a small, square alcove. Which she crawled into with him in tow. "No one knows about this but me and my brother. Now, so do you."

"This?" Keith frowned. It looked too easy to notice, a hole that anyone could fine. "Are you sure?"

"Shhh." A finger pressed to his lips, and Keith bared his teeth as the woman smiled. "Don't worry."

She gently pressed her hand near the ceiling; an elevator panel suddenly sprung to life, and began moving *sideways*. Keith felt his head smacked his head on the side of the box, which was a great help to that dratted headache as they slid silently. As the seconds went by, Dansçı's smile widened.

"Here we are." Finally, the other side of the box opened, and the two fell out into the room beyond. "Dear Kılıç."

"*Ngh*—!"

Keith shook his head, letting out several choice words as he rolled forward, clutching where he'd banged his skull. Once his vision came back into focus, he was face with a large wall of items, all of them stuck to the wall with some unknown adhesive. Holographic pictures,

microchips, brittle and dead plant life, small meteorites no bigger than a pebble. There were even several bones of varying sizes and species, and the dried exosleleton of a spotted tentacle, planted close to the center of the wall.

He knew what this was. He saw the circles around everything, with lines and arrows connecting everything. It was much like back home, with his own wall, covered in conspiracy and truth alike. Instead of red, it was written in a shaky, dried, dark purple hue.

Blood.

“Come.”

Dansçı quietly braced her hands onto Keith’s wrists, pulling him up. Her wrist brushed against his palms; even beneath her suit, he could feel the tell-tale lumps of several horizontal scars, bereft of fur to buffer it against the alien cloth.

“Dear Kılıç. Dance with me.” Her fingers fanned out like a peacock tail, and pressed against his palms. “Dance like a Lion.”

Then, her legs suddenly swept under him. Letting out a shout, Keith felt himself fall towards the floor, but found himself righting himself through his paws on the floor, allowing him to flip back onto his feet. He’d barely managed to refocus before Dansçı’s fist was coming right to his face.

“Wh—“ It was probably Keith’s good fortune that his reflexes as a Galra were slightly faster, and he managed to bend backwards, just in time to see the other flip over him, planting her landing perfectly behind him. “What the quiznak are you--!?”

“Don’t talk.” He was forced to leap to the side as a roundhouse kick nearly dropped on his face. “Dance.”

Keith did his best to drop back, to call on muscles not used for who knew how long. To try and draw on strength the diet – delicious as Ağla made it – simply didn’t give him. His own attempt to swing back was easily blocked.

“I can see it, you know.” A hard kick to the stomach. Keith staggered back, gasping. “I saw it when I first saw you. In your eyes. You are connected, aren’t you?”

“Cah—!?” Keith grabbed her open hand, only to be smacked in the

neck. “Ghhk!”

“…You’ve never danced.” Dansçı’s voice became a hiss. “Who taught you such *sloppy* moves? How will you ever expect to form Voltron if you cannot predict my moves?”

What?

Keith looked up at Dansçı, dumbfounded.

What??

He was rewarded with a punch to the face, which knocked him flat on his back, his nose feeling askew and completely numb. Instantly, she was over him, eyes wide.

“…Do they not know?” Keith watched her face fall, no doubt at the site of his nose spontaneously leaking blood. “Where you come from… do they not understand how important it is to be a Paladin?”

“Ha…” Keith let out a gasp as she bent down, bringing a hand to his head and lifting it up. “How the…I mean…” His ear twitched. “What are…are you talking about….?!”

“Ah, dear Kılıç. It seems Ağla is right.” Her other hand gently began to wipe the blood away from his face, up to his nose. “You *are* a terrible liar.”

The next thing Keith felt was pain shooting through his nasal cavity as Dansçı shoved his nose back into place. He let out a yowl as his hands went to his poor, abused septum.

“I know you’re a Paladin.” She spoke softly, as her free hand caressed his cheek. “When you have been around Holy Zarkon enough, you know. You can see it. You can see one who has been accepted by a Lion. It’s in the eyes, the face. Its…*beautiful*, isn’t it?”

Keith shut his eyes at this. She was on top of him, using her knees to pin his thighs down. No way to kick out of her grip. The moment he went to move his arms, her hands dropped his face, fast as lightning, and pinned his arms as well. She had every advantage over him. She could easily end him here and now.

Indeed, she leaned in, towards his neck, then his face, until their noses practically touched, and her drool threatened to drip onto his chin.

"*Say it.*" It was a command. "You *stubborn* half-breed. Let me hear it from your own mouth! *Say it to my face!!*"

Keith grit his teeth and let out a choked scoff. At his own stupidity of falling for her trap, and his own powerlessness.

"……I'm…a…*Paladin.*" He opened his eyes, fixing the angriest glare he could muster on her. "Just do whatever you're planning. Just—"

His eyes widened as she quietly smiled again, gently releasing his hands and slid off his legs. She then grabbed the scruff of his neck, rendering him immobile as she dragged him up. Gently released him from her grasp. Stepped back, looking him over as he stumbled. Not making any move to attack him otherwise.

What is she even—!?

"I see." She slowly raised her leg all the way backwards, in what looked like a ballet move, as her torso leaned forward and her other foot went en pointe off the floor. Her bright eyes still looked at him intently. "I'm glad you admitted it. I…can only wonder what it was like for you, the moment you were chosen. I can only dream of being a Paladin, and nothing more, for now."

She then went back up straight, still en pointe, and let herself turn even as she jumped off from her tip toes, landing on both feet, legs crossed like a cross, her body turned away.

"No one but I have gained awareness that you aren't half-Drule." She kept herself turned away from him as she spoke. "What is your other half, in truth?"

He could run. He could fight back. He could do anything, to get away from this Galra, who clearly had him cornered. His hackles were up and his tiny tail was puffed out. Yet Keith was a tad bit too confused to do either, instead finding himself staring dumbly at his…attacker? Captor?

Seriously. What was she *doing*?

If he was going to get out of this alive, he had to be careful, now.

"…Human." Nothing about where he came from. It could mean anything. He could be from anywhere. "Its human."

“Human.” She was silent, as she ruminated the word. “What a strange name for a species, inferior or otherwise. I have never heard of it.”

She slowly turned back around to face Keith.

“The Lions’ Dance. Your other kind must not have it, dear Kılıç.” There was…sympathy? sadness? pity? on her face. “I shall do a movement from it. You need not join me. Just watch.”

With that, she leaped. Practically going across the room, with little effort, and landing gracefully en pointe again. When she landed, she used the momentum to spin and perform a roundhouse kick.

“You know, you’re weak. They don’t feed you enough for your position. You should be treated like a prince, like a child of Holy Zarkon Himself, and yet you starve out here in the middle of nowhere."

"Thanks for reminding me."

"Meanwhile," If she picked up on the sarcasm, she didn't acknowledge it. "I am the best-fed person on the ship. Better fed, even than Lunulata. Did you know, that is her real name?”

“Huh? Her?”

“The Kommissar.” She brought her hands up, leaning backwards from her hip, her leg once more coming up to a right angle. There is a small chuckle on her lips “She has her secrets, too. I found them out easily. Found out many of the secrets on this ship. I am much more wily than they give me credit for. That is because in truth, even though I’m exiled, even though they claim I’m too...*wrong*, I still outrank everyone on this ship. Even the Kommissar must get wet when the waves crash."

She began to lean back.

"I am above nearly all Galra. For I am a Scholaris.”

She continued backwards until she fell. Fell on her open palms, proceeding to swing her legs around at the same time, in a double-kick that he hadn’t seen before.

“A member of the special personal guard of Holy Zarkon. The only ones in all the universe, who Holy Zarkon might appoint as His Paladins, when Voltron at last belongs to Him.”

“Voltron,” Keith’s eyes narrowed. “Doesn’t belong to him.”

“Not for now, no.” Dansçı seemed unfazed by his words. “Of course not. But there is always the possibility, isn’t there? There always is and you know it. Especially given how Voltron is so dangerous. Who else but Holy Zarkon can control and use such a monstrous construct properly?“

“It’s *not* monstrous.” Keith felt his heart start to pound. Deep breaths. She didn’t know better, right? No one on this ship really did. “And its only dangerous with Zarkon. He just wants it for power!”

“Holy Zarkon,” There was definitely a touch of defensiveness in Dansçı’s voice when she responded. Clearly, he touched a nerve. “*Only* wishes to protect the universe under His guidance. To grant every Galra among the stars peace. To uplift the ignorant vassal races to our level of brilliance. As long as Voltron is beyond His hold, and the Lions are with those who wish to destroy us, there can be no peace. Every Galra knows this to be true. Even you, deep down, know this truth in your tainted blood.”

She went down onto her knees, looking up at him.

“It’s unfortunate you are with those who would deceive you about the truth.”

“Heh. Even if that was in *any* way true, it doesn’t matter anymore what he wants. We defeated him.” Keith couldn’t help himself. Not when he heard this garbage *again*. “I was *there*. All of us did it. With *Voltron*. So he’s not touching it again.”

“…Is He dead, then?”

Keith opened his mouth to respond to the quiet question from the other, as she briefly stopped her movements. He was about to say that, of course, of course he was dead. What an utterly foolish question—

He’s still alive!? Impossible!

His mouth slowly closed, angrily realizing, for someone who was not entirely there, she had a good point. He’d lived for 10,000 years, already. He’d been sustained by quintessence and had thus been granted strength and stamina far more potent than he or any other Paladins could truly comprehend. And, they hadn’t stayed, in the end. Hadn’t made *absolutely* sure. They still didn’t *know*.

And Shiro was, last he knew, still missing—

“So, you don’t know.” She was right in front of him again, her spindly fingers clasped together below her chin, foot on the back of her head. “That is unfortunate. I wonder if He would still let you stay as a Paladin, though, when He has the Scholares to aid him in taming the Lions. Maybe if He comes here to the *İrem*, I can personally vouch for your good character, your past notwithstanding.”

“Ha.” *Over my dead body, lady.* “What makes these ‘scholars’ so special and *worthy* to Zarkon, anyway?”

“They can do what others cannot.” She methodically collapsed to her knees, like a waterfall. “Scholares can perform the Lions’ Dance. People think its’s just a dance. Its more than that. It’s an art form. A style of fighting. A physical and mental supplication to the Lions. All that you are, in a link between machine and flesh. Only the best can reach out to the Lions with it; only the best can be considered worthy of touching their minds with a Lion’s.”

She looked up at him, and smiled.

“The Emperor personally buys us as children. Has us train for many years. They said I would make a wonderful Blue Paladin, you know. You? I can tell, you’re not a Blue Paladin. Not at all. You’re far too temperamental. Like Bilgin is. He left, and I stayed.”

She closed her eyes, bringing herself to her feet from her knees, en pointe.

“I performed my Lions’ Dance during the emperor’s birthday. After so many years of practice, I put my heart and soul into it, just for Him. For the cause. For *everything*.”

Her knees shook, ever so slightly.

“He said…it was wrong, though I practiced limitless days on end. I deprived myself of sleep and food, my body and mind fully given to it, and…He said I failed. That I was…*imperfect*.”

Her pointed toes trembled.

“That night, and beyond, I heard the Lion. My Lion. It spoke to me, and told me things, told me the *truth*. Told me what I had to do to reach it. Told me the secret Druids, the ones only the enlightened can see, were controlling Holy Zarkon with a special chip in His mind.

That I would just have to take the chip out, and their control would cease. They stopped me. They put me in rags and threw me in a cage."

Keith slowly realized that he'd slumped to the floor, watching Dansçı perform. Or shadowbox. Or whatever she was doing. Her voice had a touch of anger to it.

"I would have to die, they said. I was about to, actually. Then, Admiral Otac told me my brother had lost a piece of his mind. He told me I could come to the *İrem*, if I wished. To help him out, of course!"

All that promise she had, and look where she is now.

"You really believe that?" Her words were so true, and yet so utterly mad, at the same time. "You really believe *all* of—"

"Of *course* it is *all* true!" There was a sharpness to Dansçı's voice as she jumped back, leaning back to lie on her back. "I was there! I saw it, experienced it, dear Kılıç. Why would I lie to a *Paladin*, no matter their origin?"

She folded her arms together, as she rolled onto her side with a sigh.

"One day…I'll prove it. I'll prove to everyone that I was telling the truth." She sat up. "I'll prove I heard the Lions. I'll prove my purchase was worth it. I'll show everyone, what I really can *do*. My dream will come true…"

She sat up, a happy smile.

"I won't care if I'm imperfect, then. You see? You're more proof I can sense Paladins. Why, then, would I not sense the Lions?"

Keith frowned, turning his head away. He didn't know what to think. First, she beats him up, then nothing. First, she says nonsense, but then reveals she knew he was a Paladin. The others on the *İrem* claimed her brother was mad, and others said she was. He wasn't sure what to think or believe, in regards to—

Wait.

"More proof?" His head snapped towards the obvious wall of conspiracy. "Like that stuff?"

"No. That is merely part of my evidence, it is help. But it is not as substantial as that which I've received recently." She stood up, slowly,

from a cross-legged position. “Like you.”

With that, Dansçı leaped once more, over to the wall, activating a panel. Her fingers delicately touched it, and the wall of conspiracy suddenly split, revealing another secret alcove.

“Like *him*.”

Keith was instantly on his feet. The moment he saw the glowing liquid, he was moving towards it.

It was a cryo pod that she had behind that wall. It was much more elaborate than the escape pod he'd been trapped in - it had certainly been fitted for a much longer sojourn inside. There was a feeding tube system, a heart monitor panel, a replaceable filtration system, even an extra monitor to indicate when the air filter needed to be changed for the breathable liquid to remain optimal.

And, someone was inside it.

It couldn’t be. This wasn’t seriously happening. She had a body. She had a *body*, that she *kept*, and he just realized as he looked at the emerging shape within that it was *breathing*. He was already panicking and horrified when he realized the implications of keeping a body, dead or alive, in this place, by Dansçı, for who knew what reason.

Then he saw the hair.

No.

He would know that hair anywhere.

Oh my god.

His movement became a two-step run.

“Dear Kılıç…?”

Keith was right in front of the pod, his hands slapping on the glass. The sound of that action was enough to echo through the empty, unused room several times over. It probably would have woken the dead.

The floating form of Takashi Shirogane within, however, didn’t respond.

Shiro…!?

Chapter End Notes

ATTN:
File: Dansçı and File: Bilgin have been declassified.

Doğrusu

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Shiro had inexplicably disappeared after the battle against Zarkon, a full-blown panic had ensued within the Castle of Lions. Once more, the Black Paladin was missing, and this time - unlike with the wormhole - there seemed to be no bead on where to find him, no one else nearby to help find him, or even on how he'd managed to get out of his Lion and disappear without a trace. It had been terrifying when Keith abruptly found himself stepping up to try and lead the others to some semblance of unity in the face of their worry, especially as time went by and the likelihood of finding him alive began to lessen.

It was because of Shiro, because of rumors that the Champion of the Galra's gladiatorial games was inexplicably spotted somewhere near Suntala, that the team had gone to that junk ship to begin with. Now, on this strange ship much like that one, Keith found him.

And he was *alive*.

It was terrifying to contemplate the events which somehow brought him here, both coincidentally and through random chance, seeing how that all led to Keith staring at the human in the cryo-pod, as he stepped back to see him in full. The one-armed human. Wait.

Where was his Galra arm?

No, it didn't matter. Not now, not when—

"That's…!" Keith's head whipped his head back towards Dansçı, only to find her standing right next to him, her head leaning in towards his. "*How*…!?"

"I know, dear Kılıç. Isn't it wonderful? Aside from you, it's my greatest piece of proof of my prowess." Even beneath the glow of her eyes, Keith could see the fire, the bright happiness within. "I bought him. I managed to get him with a few of my wages, befitting my position, from those *foolish* pirates. I guess no one else on that old ship wanted him with his other arm off, like it was...but I don't care. He's still a Paladin. He's still like you. He's…imperfect like this, and yet I understand him so well, you know? He's…like us now. Like *me*! Its…"

Keith didn't respond, instead turning back and walking again towards the pod.

"It's so beautiful."

He brought his hands up to it, before clenching his claws against the cold glass, slowly looking him over with wide eyes. Inside the pod, Shiro looked oddly peaceful, his chest slowly expanding and contracting with each breath. He wore a black suit, much like the one worn when Keith had first broken him out of the Galaxy Garrison's hold. His hair was different, longer; his lock of white hair was down to his chest, and the crew cut he had always carefully maintained had become curtained, along with his beard. His *beard*.

At least he didn't seem to have any outward injuries, aside from the obvious lack of arm, and the noticeable decrease in his muscle mass along with the changed hair. Not that it mattered, especially since it wasn't the outward injuries that Keith was worried about - that any of them had necessarily worried about back at the Castle.

It was all of the changes which made Keith slowly realize, with a hot fury in his belly, that he had spent the entire time worrying, thinking of him, scared about him. And Dansçı...had bought him, keeping him this entire time, right under his nose. Knew he and Keith were Paladins, and had only now revealed it to him.

Of course.

She didn't consider them as anything else but her *things*.

"…When did you," Keith almost spat the word out through his teeth. "*buy* him?"

"Oh, that was several *hafta* before you were brought on board. One of those silly pirates knew I liked looking for evidence, so he told me about it and offered to sell him to me. Once I saw him, I knew what he was. I couldn't resist making him mine. And, as I said, with...you.." Dansçı blinked, watching as Keith's fists shook. "Dear Kılıç, are you all right?"

"He's not a thing you buy."

"Huh?"

"He's not *yours*."

"Why, Kılıç." Dansçı's tone was one of surprise, filled with something like condescension. As if she were saying in her words, silly little Kılıç. Silly little half-breed. “Well, of course not, he’s—“

“A *person*.” Keith turned back to her, his eyes bright with anger. “If you think I’m going to let you keep him like this forever…to…give to *Zarkon*, you’re wrong.”

With that, he stormed off and stuffed himself into the elevator, leaving the other to let out a cry of confusion as he did. He could see the devastated look on her face as he looked back at her once he was in that uncomfortable sideways position.

It made him sick.

“Kılıç?!...I…we have so much in common…”

“No, we *don’t*. We’re nothing alike!”

“I-I…” Bright tears began to fill the other’s eyes, and her lips began to tremble. “You’re…but you’re a *Paladin*, you have the link to a *Lion*. Surely, surely I thought you *understood*…!”

“*Shut up!*” He spat out his words as the door closed, unable to control his rage. “You just don’t get it, do you? So let me spell it out for you, *Dansçı*. I don’t care what you have to say, I don't care what you are, or what you think you are! You...you like watching people lose control of themselves! You bought another person like...like a *prize*, and you...you pin *bones* to a wall, and all of that makes you think you can convince *Zarkon* of anything! And you think its all *beautiful*!"

He took a deep breath, and let out one final snarl.

"You're not *imperfect*. You. Are. ***CRAZY*!**”

“*Kılıç*--!!”

He ignored the screams she emitted as she rushed to the door, only to have the elevator slide closed before she could stop it. Once he slid sideways back the way he came, and tumbled out into the deck’s main hallway, he jumped up and ran, getting away from the source of his rage and the faint sounds coming from her. He could feel his emotions rise to a boiling point; if he had stayed, he likely would have tried to snap her neck.

She would have deserved it, in his mind, at that moment. Because he

was alive. He was *alive. Shiro was alive.*

And this *whole time*, that *psycho—*

He threw himself into the room where the art splattered the walls, and let out an angry roar as he rushed forward in a stumble, teeth fully bared. By the time he was finished, some time later, several dozen more knuckle-shaped splatters of fresh blue blood dripped in one particular corner, each one larger than the last, with several drops of blood leading to another corner, where Keith huddled and buried his head in his hands for he-didn't-care-how-long.

BEEEEEEEEP** **BEEEEEEEEPP

New objective. Save Shiro. Hope Shiro doesn't bludgeon me with his stump of an arm when he wakes up and sees me like this. Figure out what the quiznak happened to his Galra arm. Get him off this ship no matter what.

"**GOOD MORNING.**" A loud automated voice echoed through the hallway, as the sound of skittering feet accompanied it. "**PLEASE PROCEED TO THE DECK 2 BOW FOR MORNING MUSTER.**"

He could have handled waiting. Keith wasn't exactly the most patient person, but on account of himself, he had no problem going through whatever hoops he needed to do without arousing suspicion from the crew. That was what Shiro would have probably done, in his situation. Not that he thought Shiro would ever have to worry about looking like a Galra, but still, the idea was the same. Cool, calm, collected. That's what Shiro would do, most of the time.

The presence of Shiro, however - his *actual, living* presence, the last thing he had ever expected on this ship - changed everything. Thus his presence and the implications, the needed steps to get him away from the *İrem*, was all added to Keith's mental list of Things To Do, and the revelation in general didn't improve his mood one iota. Or his headache, which came back with a vengeance after he shoved himself into his capsule and tried to sleep. On the contrary, he was sure everyone noticed the sudden and inexplicable drop in his attitude when he woke up, ate his food, went to his assigned station (Gun Assembly again. *Yay.*) and began to work without a single comment.

He'd not responded to the normal morning hails. He'd not spoken to anyone during breakfast. None of that mattered. Nothing he was doing mattered. He wasn't going to care anymore about these insane half-bloods and disabled Galra and just focus on himself and Shiro. *That* was what mattered.

Even as his fingers flew and made the weaponry for the enemy he so despised, though, the crew wouldn't leave him alone.

"Are you ok, Kılıç?"

"Kılıç, what happened to your hands?"

"Everything all right with you, Kılıç?"

He clenched his fists tightly, ignoring the pain in his head and hands.

"I," he growled, his ear twitching wildly. "*Am fine*."

After that, most knew well enough to back away from him and not bother him. Had he really been on this ship long enough for people to know when he was about to blow up at them? No, no, that didn't matter. He didn't care anymore. Just make the stupid guns and then figure out how to get Shiro out of here. For real. For good.

He did briefly excuse himself to go to the Med Bay when the patrolling guards commented on his bloodied hands and let him leave for that purpose. As he let Teori goop him up with quintessence, he could feel the other looking at him with some concern.

"Are you—"

"Yes." Keith have him a glare. "I'm *fine*."

"…Heard you were with Dansçı last night." That earned Teori a growl. "Uh, hey, no judgment. Just…brace yourself around Bilgin today if you see him. She's...apparently upset."

With that, Teori let Keith go with his rapidly-tingling knuckles. As he left the Med Bay, he nearly ran into Oğul.

"Oh! Hey, what's going on?"

"Hm." As the panel slid closed behind him, Keith could hear Oğul start to speak with the doctor in a low voice. "So Sarışın and I…"

He immediately ignored whatever else was being said behind the

panel and stomped back to Gun Assembly. By the time he got there his knuckles were fully healed, without a single scratch.

"UP! UP!! UP!! ***HAZIROL!*** "

No one was late for the evening muster that night.

"Finally, something you d*efec*tive whelps can celebrate. You're all on-time." The Kommissar's heels clicked deliberately as she paced, staring at each half-breed and disabled with obvious disdain. "I bet you *yarıldı and sakatladı* all feel *good* about it, huh? Feel like you *accomplished* something? Well, you would be ***WRONG***!!"

That last word echoed so loudly that several, including Keith, were forced to fold their ears back with a grimace.

"If any of you really cared you'd do more work! You'd be putting in more into your work *all of the time*!! But oh, I understand, *some* of you are just too *delicate* for the task!" Staring at Oğul. "Too busy *talking* with others about who-knows-what!" Staring at Dansçı. "Too busy *crying* about who *cares* what!" Staring at Sarışın again. "Too busy *failing your stumps like a* ***retarded baby***!!"

Crying. Good. Hopefully Keith had given her some food for thought, or at least that's how Keith decided to think of it. His urge to punch the Kommissar on Sarışın's behalf, meanwhile, was edging on murderous.

…Wait, he was supposed to not care about anyone on the ship other than Shiro anymore.

Quiznak.

"The only one who *remotely* met their quota today was Kılıç. Of *all* the possible candidates for that!" Keith nearly choked on his own saliva when the Kommissar turned to him. "I mean, *really*!? Is *that* how you *want* the admiral to *see* you? Too *stupid* and *incompetent* to outpace a half-Drulean *newcomer*!? You pa*thet*ic, useless…!"

It was at that point that Keith stopped listening, as he felt all eyes on him. The amount of yelling was also making his headache more intolerable.

"…and go eat your *dinners*," The crack of the Galra terror's whip – wait a second, she wasn't holding anything. How—*never mind that wasn't important* - brought him back to the present. "And then go finish out your *evenings* doing whatever useless, banal frivolities you all manage to engage in when using your *obvious tiny brains*!! ***DISMISSED***!!"

Finally, Keith thought, as he turned to leave amidst the murmuring of those around him. He felt some pats on his shoulder, and managed to hear a mumbled 'congrats, Kılıç' and 'good job, Kılıç' here and there. At least the Wicked Witch was done, slapping her heels together and stomping out of the area without another word.

His head still hurt, though. Kept hurting. It was annoying.

"Hey. Kılıç." He felt Oğul's paw slip under his elbow. "Good job."

"Yeah." Keith mumbled as he rubbed his temple. "I guess."

"So…" Oğul looked left, then right, before lowering his voice. "Tonight, after curfew starts. If you can, meet me in the Mess Hall. Then, we'll go down to Cargo Hold 7. We've got to talk. It's about getting the Kommissar replaced. Petitioning my father. We might have a way to finally do it."

"Heh." A small smirk played on Kılıç's face. Ok, maybe he cared about that. A little. A teeny weeny bit. "Gee, really? You want to replace her? Here I thought she was just so nice and pleasant, too."

"I'm serious." Oğul frowned. "You should really be there, I think your input would be a good thing."

"…Yeah." After a moment, Keith nodded. "Yeah, sure, I'll be there. Count me in."

"Good." Oğul nodded. "I was hoping you'd say that. Meet you then."

With that, Oğul let go, and disappeared into the crowd. Keith for his part, couldn't help but smile, just a little. Nothing like a little rebellion after all before he finally found a way out, right?

Keith knew the drill, at least, on how to slip through curfew by now.

He'd made it second nature, knew the route to several good spots through the ship. He wasn't sure where Cargo Deck 7 was, though. He couldn't find it on any of the directories he'd used on the ship. It was as if it didn't exist. Probably why Oğul wanted to meet him in the Mess Hall.

Then again, the room that Shiro's pod was resting in, wasn't in the directory, either. It was there where he hid while the guards and the Kommissar - but mainly the Kommissar - made their inevitable sweeps through the ship. He found himself leaning next to the pod, letting the coolness hit his aching temples, hoping Dansçı wouldn't come. Or, at least not just yet, not until he'd left . She probably wouldn't, given how the Kommissar's shrilling faintly echoed into the room now and then. Hopefully.

His headache still hadn't subsided, for some reason. The cold of the cryo-pod helped, a little, for a few seconds.

"…Hey."

Galra paws pressed against the glass of the pods, as Keith turned in his lean and stared at the unconscious form inside. Clearing his throat, he spoke as quietly as he could, as if Shiro would wake up that very moment and perhaps hear something of the Red Paladin's voice in his raspy alien warbling.

"I don't know if you can hear me in there. I don't even know how you got here." Keith looked down. "But I'm glad you're ok. Arm or no arm…though I kind of wish I knew how you'd left the Black Lion. How you left *us*, and why."

Silence. Of course.

"…I…I'm kind of glad you're asleep right now. I know that sounds bad, but...if you knew where you were, I don't know how you'd take it." Keith bit his lips. "Galra is kind of a dirty word for you no matter what, after what happened. Seeing them...remembering what they did to you...I can only imagine how scared it makes you. Heck, if you saw me right now, you probably wouldn't want to even look at me. You'd just as soon…attack me than see who I was. I get that. I don't blame you for that."

Even if it hurts and it sucks.

Surely Shiro could have finished that sentence. If he wasn't a human popsicle.

“I mean, you do know the truth about me, that’s not the problem.” Keith closed his eyes, listening to the humming of the pod. “Just…I know. I've been thinking about it for the past...I don't even know how long I've been cooped up here. There’s a difference between knowing the truth and seeing the truth, you know? If that makes sense…right?”

“It does.”

Keith’s eyes bolted right back open wide, as he looked back up at Shiro. Still asleep, still basically frozen. He hadn't spoken. If not him, then—

“Kılıç.” He slowly turned to the sound of Oğul’s voice. “Figured you’d be here…*pal.*”

The Galra who was his superior officer was a good few yards from him, a large green bag in his hand, and he wasn’t alone. Sarışın, Teori, Ağla, Biligin – and behind them all, Dansçı – stood in the doorway of the room. A doorway to the side, far from the elevator he’d used. One he’d clearly not been privy to last night. Their yellow eyes were all staring right at him.

Their expressions were anything but happy.

“Yeah…*pal.*” Biligin’s arm was on his hip as he glared at Keith, who was instantly on his feet, leaning against the cryo-pod. “*Pal’s* a good word, Oğul. But I think there’s a *better* one to describe him, yeah?”

With that, Oğul threw the bag onto the floor, the contents therein making a loud clang as metal met metal. Several items flew out of the bag, rolling and tumbling towards Keith’s feet. Upon recognizing them, the half-Galra couldn’t suppress his gasp.

The bag had been what was in Sarışın’s hidden room. The one that had had all of the junk in it, that she seemingly worked on when she wasn't doing zooprax night. He’d forgotten all about it.

“Maybe…*Pal*adin?”

His fully-intact bayard bounced off the sole of his shoe and rolled to the floor in front of him.

No.

Keith dropped onto a knee as he stared at the now-open bag and its contents, both in and out.

Oh my god.

His hands sifted through the large pieces, tossing them out of the bag as he realized what each piece was and where it went. His armor. His helmet. His belt. What was left of it, outside of the fully-intact bayard, it was all here. He hadn't seen them in who-knew-how-long, not since he'd fallen unconscious in the escape pod, that radiated quintessence burning through it with a hiss like bubbles in bathwater.

Now, what was left of the metal parts of his Paladin suit were practically spit-shined back to their original colors, and staring right back at his wide yellow eyes.

"…I-I thought these were junked in the Foundry when I came on board—!" were the first words out of his mouth before he could even think of a better excuse. "Is...Teori, you *told* me that was what...!"

"*Nope*." The stares and glares had not lessened in their intensity as Sarışın spoke, waving her stumps. "They were gonna be, but since they were all you had left of your old life, I decided to be nice and get them out of the scrap pile and clean them in my spare time with the polishing equipment and chemicals! Not often people have those kind of mementos. I was gonna fix them for your birthday. I had Oğul help me when he could."

"…I never told you my birthday."

"Oh," The gleam from Sarışın's eyes was not helping the situation. "I would have figured it out eventually! I'll still find a way to figure it out, whether you want me to or not. Anyways, I'd already been a bit suspicious, personally, when you acted all like you didn't go through Processing at all, and and you didn't know basic stuff about the ship or the job or anything. I mean, kid, I know Processing's sloppy, but that bad? And I *know* you aren't dumb, so what was the problem, right?"

"There was also the fact of how you came in, too." Teori stared at him. "The fact you came in an escape pod like that...some of our newcomers have come in like that, but the filtration system failure had revealed that you'd been out in space for a long time. If you were supposed to be on the ship, we would have gotten notice from a ship, or from Processing, or *someone*, and you would have been picked up long before you were in any danger of dying, and your organs would've been straightened out. Plus, the fact that the Kommissar had to finish your Processing when you woke up...after awhile, it *di*d make me wonder."

"It was odd for all of us." Ağla spoke up. "Though I thought perhaps it was because you were Drule and perhaps Drule have different brain processing,or maybe Processing just didn't like you, but then you began to ask about whether I thought Holy Zarkon was alive or not. And then I thought, how strange. Regardless of how one feels about Him, why would anyone ask such a question so blatantly unless...well, unless they had a reason to want Him dead? And we know that those who want to control Voltron want to kill Him."

"That's..." Keith felt his tongue grow heavy. "That's not why I asked–"

"And *then*? Then you said *quiznak*. *Quiznak*!" Sarışın's laugh only made things feel more pit-in-the-stomach worrying. "I mean, what books did you study when you were making your background up? Your handlers should've updated your *slang* at least."

Keith's mouth opened to respond, but found he had none to that particular accusation. She did have a point, if her grandmother was who would use that term. Of course all he could think of was *quiznak*, over and over, as he felt everything deteriorate around him. Felt these Galra's feelings for him turn into hostility.

Oh, the irony.

"So," Sarışın crossed her stumps. "When I finished polishing your armor, I realized what kind of armor it was – don't look so *surprised*, kiddo, I've seen Holy Zarkon, remember? So I've seen how similar some of His armor is to yours – and alerted Oğul to that."

"And *he* told *us*." Bilgin took what Keith could only register as a menacing step forward. "Then we talked. And then Kommissar said Dansçı was crying, and she told me *everything* about how *you made her cry*."

Another step forward.

"I don't like *jerks* like you, making my baby sister cry."

"…There's no Cargo Deck 7, then, I take it." Keith felt himself stepping away from the cryo-pod and the Galra in front of him, despite his blood screaming for the potential fight with such a large opponent. The glorious win he could achieve against such odds. *Stop. STOP.* "You were going to lure me here."

"A-actually…" Dansçı spoke up at this. "I…told them about this room. About you. After I stopped crying."

“Yeah, you’re kind of lucky?” Ağla had the ghost of a smile on her face, clearly taking at least a little bemusement out of the situation. “Our original plan was to knock you out in the Mess Hall while you were waiting for our commander here, and then drag you to the Foundry and...well, do what we're doing right now.”

“Um…” Another step backwards. “Thanks, I guess.”

“Forgive me for being so blunt, but I wouldn’t be thanking any of us right now, Paladin.” Biligin’s giant claws curled into a fist as Ağla continued. “I mean, you *do* have a good ruse, we’ll give you that. And I still don’t know how you managed the disguise *and* lied to me without me feeling you out. Still! Even not knowing about Processing, claiming to be half-breed on this ship *was* pretty smart!”

“Yeah, I have to agree.” Teori nodded solemnly. “You *definitely* got me with the extra organs, too. That was also a good touch. A bit over-the-top, but I guess renegade Paladins are willing to do whatever it takes, *right*?”

“Wait—*what*!?” Now Keith was against the wall. They actually thought he *added* his own *extra organs* to— “I’m not—I *am* part-Galra! That’s something Dansçı sh—“

Keith’s protest was abruptly stopped as Bilgin’s fist whaled across his face. Birds tweeted in front of Keith’s eyes and the world became a spinning mess of colors as he flopped over, right into the big man’s unfisted – but still beefy – paw. None of this was helping his headache, though for a few seconds he could have sworn he’d blacked out. In fact, he probably did.

“Hey, *Pal*adin!” The next thing Keith could semi-consciously realize, he was being held by the scruff of his neck – stupid Galra weak spot that it was – and his face was shoved right into Bilgin’s menacing eyes. “So, how about I keep punching you until I knock that disguise right off you, huh!? How’d you do it, huh? Holograph? Microchip!? Shapeshifter!? And for *what*!? Think you can come *here* and—”

“I don’t think that’s how a holographic disguise works, Bilgin!”

“I-its not…” Dansçı sniffed. “Because—“

“*But!*” Sarışın’s left stump rotated in a rah-rah motion. “You can totally keep punching him if you want. Maybe he’ll tell us why he’s *really* on our ship! *Bwa*haha!”

“I second that motion.” Teori nodded excitedly. “Then we can leave him for the Kommissar to pick up, yeah?”

“Oh, *definitely* thirding!”

"Besides, better him than *me* beating you up, Paladin," Sarışın smiled toothily. "Because trust me, you don't want me beating you up. You wouldn't survive."

"Wait," Keith gasped, the moment he could find his voice again. "No! Stop! Listen—!"

“So—*hey*—“

The last was Oğul, who stopped as Keith’s leg swung right into Bilgin’s shin, causing him to drop down with a yowl. In response, Oğul flew forward, his claws reaching out to grab Keith’s clothing. Keith, for his part, silently thanked his lucky stars that he saw the other coming, and managed to roll away from the move. He jumped over the armor on the floor, then turned towards everyone.

“*NGH*! LISTEN to me! I didn’t *choose* to come here, you idiots!” He hissed, teeth bared. “I was adrift over a planet called Suntala—“

“Yeah, *sure* you were.” Oğul turned back to Keith. “So tell us why we should *believe* you now!”

Keith almost laughed at Oğul. Fast as they were with their Galra genes jump-started, even without the handicaps of so many others on the ship, and even not being as used to the weakened conditions they were forced to live in, Oğul was practically telegraphing his move. Keith’s knee went right into Oğul’s midsection, before his fist smashed against the other’s face. It was exhilarating, hearing the bone-crunching response to his attack, and Keith’s blood sang as he realized he was taking on a half-dozen Galra – three of which were full-blooded. It made his body and mind forget his caution, to feel such wonderful, terrible sensations.

It made him *want* the fight. Of *course* he wanted the fight. How could he *not*? They wanted to question him? They wanted to beat him without a chance for him to defend himself against their accusations? They *stupid, ignorant* accusations?

He’d show them all.

“I…!” Before he even knew he was doing it, Keith was grabbing Oğul

and smashing him into the side of Shiro's cryo-pod, blood from his opponent's mouth spattering the pane. "*Am*!…telling!…the!… ***TRUTH***!!"

"STOP!!" He was suddenly yanked away by his hair, to which he let out a growl. "Stop, you'll break it!"

You'll let my toy go free!

That was, at least, how Keith saw it in his angered state, his bloodlust increasing and his sense of control lessening. His blood pumped, and his veins popped, as he turned to face her, his teeth bared. Dansçı saw Shiro - saw *him* - as a toy, after all. A pawn. Something to *buy*, right? Something to *give* to *Holy Zarkon—*

Dansçı wasn't simply tossed, she was thrown into the wall with a scream, tufts of Keith's fur flying out of her hands. Keith then turned and slid under the recovered Bilgin's legs, delivering a kick to the back of his shin this time, before shoving him to the ground, his foot on his neck.

"Oh no." He heard Teori as he quickly jumped into the fray. "Don't worry, guys, I—"

Teori didn't even have a chance to finish his question before he was knocked out cold on the floor, Keith spitting on him as he gave the unconscious doctor a further kick. *Pathetic.* Was that all they had for him? No, surely it couldn't be! They'd attacked him, they'd intended to hurt him, and this was all they had to show?! How dare they. How dare they.

Weaklings. They were all weaklings and they all deserved what he had in store for them.

"*Come on*!" Keith finally snarled like a tiger, his head whipping towards the remaining two opponents still standing, his hands bloodied, his drool coming out in a heavy line to the floor, his eyes blazing. He was pumped and ready. He would take on whatever they dished out. He could do it. He could take them all on. Every last one. "You *want* some? You want some of *this*!? You want to *dance!?*? I'm looking for a *partner*!! *COME ON*!!"

Silence.

"What's wrong? What are you *scared* of!? You wanted this, *didn't you*!? I said *COME* ***ON***!!"

Nothing. Heaving a breath he yanked his feet off of Bilgin's neck and advanced towards the two with a slow stomp, his back arched and a predatory gleam in his eyes. These spineless idiots. They challenged him, belittled him, insulted him, and then didn't back up their words. *Who* did they *think* they *were*? That was really ticking him—

He stopped when he saw the look on Ağla's face. Then on Sarışın's. Then, when they backed up and away from him while he stared at them, with Sarışın taking a crawling step – not towards him, but in front of the half-Medan, her stumps up and ready. His adrenaline was still pumped, but suddenly his desire to fight was drastically deflated, his bloodlust crashing like a truck into a mountain.

That was when he realized. It wasn't that they had hated him. Or, at least they hadn't *quite* hated him before he knocked their lights out, they might hate him from then on out. But—no. It wasn't hate in their faces. Not entirely.

It was fear.

These Galra were *afraid* of him.

His fists dropped, and he looked around. Bilgin was sputtering, gasping gratefully for the air that Keith had cut off so brutally. Dansçı was up and plastered to the wall, whimpering as she looked at him. Oğul was only just stirring from his small pool of blue blood, moaning as he did so. Teori wasn't moving at all.

All because of *him*.

He did this. He did this without the Red Lion. Without Voltron, the monster that, at least per the Galra Empire's ridiculous propaganda, only the Holy Zarkon could control without threatening the universe. He couldn't begin to imagine just how terrifying it had to have been for the Galra in front of him to realize there was a walking, talking, conscious Paladin from the enemy on their ship – and yet, knowing that he could hurt them, still tried to face him.

At least Shiro wasn't awake to see how far he'd fallen.

"I…" He looked back down at his bloodied hands, his breath quickening into hyperventilation. "I-I—"

"Right!" Sarışın's voice cut him off, her tone strangely cheerful. "Ok, I believe him. He's totally half-Galra."

“What?” Keith stared at the quadriplegic and her seemingly complete turnaround, gasping through his speeding inhales and exhales. “You believe me *now*?”

“Why not?” Sarışın shrugged, the fear he’d sensed in her dropping. “You totally just had an episode! You were screaming for blood, you tossed a *Scholaris* around like a towel *and* you were ready to rip this gimp apart like silly putty with your bare hands! Nobody but a carrier of Galra blood can have an episode like *that*, disguise or not. *Bwa*haha!”

Keith’s response was to stare at her dumbfoundedly.

“I…um.” Ağla looked down. “I haven’t seen your tells, either, since you were talking. I don’t think you’re lying about being a half-breed, either, anymore. Or…I guess about the…drifting part. I hope.”

They were just...believing him now? He didn't get it. Nothing about this made sense. Maybe it was another trap. Keith looked down at the floor, suddenly feeling very tired and very confused.

This was seriously happening and he didn't know what to say. 'Thank you' seemed moot at the very least, and a bad idea at the worst. He was, as they had found out, a Paladin, after all. They could still turn him in at any time, from here on out, and he knew it.

“Ngh.” Keith turned to Oğul; his face was caked in blue blood. “That… still doesn’t explain why you’re here. Your Voltron friends could—*NN!* —could’ve let you go on purpose.”

“…They didn’t.” Keith closed his eyes. “I doubt they even know I’m here. My suit does have a tracking device—“

“Nice.” Bilgin was still catching his breath. “*Jerk*.”

“—but whatever I got exposed to before I jettisoned fried through it along with my armor.” Keith sighed. “Otherwise you would have already had Voltron come and go long before now. I swear it's the truth.”

“…Heh. It had to be blue quintessence, then.” Oğul winced as he sat up against Shiro’s cryo-tank, “If…if you *were* really near Suntala, and you *really* have Galra blood in you…if you're really telling the truth, that’s the only type of quintessence that can be mined in that system, because of the elantinery.”

“The *what*?”

“Elantinery. The liquid form of elantinineum. Your Voltron forces don't know of it?”

Keith's response was to blankly stare at the other.

“Heh, if it's the truth that you really don't know. Planetary systems in this sector of space were formed due to the collapse of the İlçeler Nebula millions of years ago." A moan came from behind Keith as Oğul continued. Teori was waking up. "The particle make-up of the Nebula was apparently unique, unique enough to create a powerful radioactive element not seen elsewhere in space, and its reflected in the quintessence of almost every planet in the area. Even a few of the suns glow blue, depending on where you go.”

“Right…you mentioned it was unstable and killed a bunch of people and miners who were exposed to it.” He did remember that much, at least. Now that he was finally getting some answers. Somehow. “So what *exactly* does it do to people like us? Can it be *reversed*?”

“Ow…” At this, Teori sat up, grumbling. “Are we still beating Kılıç up, guys?”

“No.” Sarışın waved a stump. “We stopped that a while ago because he had a bloodlust. C’mon, Teori, keep up!”

“I’m trying! How long was I *even* out!?”

“Hey. Doesn't matter, Teori." Keith’s eye began to twitch even as he said it. “That elanternini…stuff. I need to know.”

“What’s wrong?” Bilgin gave Keith a dark look. “Don’t like being like us, *Pal*adin?”

“That’s not—“

Keith looked down. He didn’t hate them. Realized he couldn’t, unfortunately. They'd had every right to be mad at him, and he was in too deep to not care, anymore. Still, if there was a way to become human again, even if it was just for the sake of his friends on the Castle. He would take it. He’d grasp whatever straw he could find.

The Irem would probably be glad to see him gone, once the truth got out, in any case.

“It’s not like that. Just…explain what it is to me. Please?” His shoulders slumped. “I still don’t know anything about what happened to me. You guys had Processing to help you or…whatever, I didn’t. I just ended up here.”

“I…it jump-starts Galra genes, if you have a certain amount of them. That’s what the radioactivity helps to do.” Ağla reluctantly spoke after a moment. “It can kill full-blooded Galra very fast, but..when *we’re* exposed to it, the irradiated liquid bonds to our genetic structure. It… suppresses...somehow? It suppresses the non-Galra genetic code. So when we emerge from it we…you know…start to transform. And we become this, forever. If we live.”

“…So its permanent.” Keith looked at everyone, who simply looked back at him with somber and – for some reason – confused expressions. “There’s no way for me to be like I used to. Figures.”

“Well…” There was a look of outright concern on Dansçı’s face. “U-um. Dear Kılıç?”

“*What.*”

“Are you ok? Your right eye is twitching pretty bad.”

“I just got decked in the face by the Galra incarnation of a *mountain.*” That just made the twitching increase, which increased his headache; Keith rubbed his left temple. “I’m *not* ok.”

“…Kılıç.” Upon seeing that, Oğul was forcing himself to stand up. “Your eye's been twitching for *dakika* now. How long have you had that headache?”

“What? Why?” Keith’s ear twitched. “It’s nothing.”

“Kılıç. Lyyyying.” Ağla’s voice was flat. “Sarışın, didn’t…we just have a big fight about this, or did I hallucinate it?”

“…*Several* gün.” With an annoyed grunt, Keith brought his hand down from his head. “When you and I were together talking about the Helvicta. It hasn’t gone away.”

“Exactly how much of the quintessence were you exposed to when...you were apparently in Suntala?” At that answer, Oğul straightened himself up. “Do you remember?”

“…I don’t know, about…?” He rubbed his head a little more. He

wasn't sure where Oğul was going with this sudden line of questioning. "I definitely remember at least two or three dozen containers. Might have been some more, but definitely that many. Not sure if all of it got on me, but-"

"*How long*?"

"A minute, I guess? Or…dock kicks, whatever you call it. Just long enough to be sprayed by it." Keith grit his teeth. He wasn't seeing where this conversation was going, probably because one eye was threatening to close. "Why?"

"Oh, that…"

First fear, then confusion, and now worry was in the eyes of every Galra – half- or otherwise – around him as he looked back up and about.

"What?" Keith felt an annoyed growl rising in his throat "*What*?"

"Actually, I…lemme look. I know where you're going with it, Oğul." Sarışın hobbled on her stumps and looked up at him, motioning for Keith to lean down. As he did, she took his face and looked at it, letting out a disapproving clicking sound as she turned his chin over and up, staring at his eyes. "Oh, yeah."

"Yeah?" Oğul's eyes widened. "Then...?"

"Yup." The quadriplegic nodded. "Ok, well, looks like we're going to be in a lot of trouble very soon..., well, *you're* going to be in a lot of trouble, but—"

"*Why*?" The growl escaped his throat, and his heart pumped harder again with impatience, in spite of himself. "*Someone* please tell me what the *problem* is before I have to finally *beat* it out of you people!"

That made all save Sarışın flinch.

"*Geez*, calm down, kiddo, I was going to *tell* you." Sarışın sighed, waving off the threatening tone as she let his chin go. "The *problem* is that you're turning back."

Chapter End Notes

ATTN:
File: Ağla and File: Teori have been declassified.

Temizleme

The silence after Sarışın's words was so deafening, one could hear a pin drop. Yet Keith blinked, shaking his head in disbelief as he stared at the disabled, full-blooded Galra.

"Turning…*back*?" He repeated the words so he could be sure he heard them. "As in…turning back…into a *human*?"

"AH!" Ağla's shout made Keith jump back "I *knew* you were lying about being half-Drule—"

"For the—*yes, ok*, I lied about that part! Dansçı figured it out and—" Keith actually stomped his foot down. "*Focus!* What do you mean turn back!? Is that what you mean!?"

"…Yyyyes." Sarışın tapped her front left stub on the floor, in what seemed like a bout of nervousness. A first for Keith to see that in her. "That is exactly what I mean. Wouldn't be the first time I've seen it happen, either."

Keith found his mouth opening, but nothing coming out. This was great news. Wonderful news. It should have been great news. Keith wasn't sure what to think given the fear level in the room had suddenly jacked up again. It was putting him back on edge.

"Wh—b—*how*!?" He finally found his voice. "I thought having our genes jumped and suppressed and whatnot was permanent, you just said—!"

"No, you just assumed it," Bilgin muttered. "Jerk."

"Stop *calling* me that—"

"It *is* permanent." Oğul's voice cut through the argument before it could really start. "*If* the procedure's done correctly. If enough exposure in enough of the blue quintessence is done. But, we're talking gallons of it. We all had to bathe in giant vats for *gün* before we any of us could come out of it."

"I didn't, obviously." Sarışın smirked. "Or any of the full-bloods on board, but yeah. You'd have to have practically *drowned* in the stuff to have it last for even an average Galra lifespan. Not enough exposure to the radioactivity means not enough genetic bonding and

suppression took place. A lot of the first half-breeds brought here had that problem, Oğul included. Kommissar personally dragged him from the ship and tossed him back into a vat when she figured it out!"

Keith watched Oğul's jaw tighten at this. Going through that once had been bad enough, and Keith was basically all grown-up. Oğul, on the other hand, thirteen yil—er, years ago, on the other hand?

"Then…" Nevertheless, Keith's hopes started to rise. "The temple headache?"

"Common first side effect for when the quintessence begins to break down at the genetic level and flush itself from your system." Oğul looked away at this. "It's going to get worse. And your eyesight will start to change, then your hearing. Then, after that, who knows."

"…Was that what happened to you?"

"Yeah." Oğul frowned. "As Sarışın so *bluntly* put it—"

"You're welcome, commander! *Bwa*haha!" Sarışın stopped laughing when she saw the other's face. "Ok, *ok*, that wasn't funny, sorry about that, kiddo."

"—it got corrected. You can get it corrected, too, you know. Right now, we're the only ones who know your exposure was a fluke, but it's only a matter of time and you know it. You can still work with this, probably. Make it sound like the first time just didn't take right, and arrange for it be made permanent."

"…I…"

Keith was silent at this. Even as a starved half-breed, his strength and power *was* pretty amazing. Not to mention, regardless of the monotony of the work and the utterly terrifying existence of the Kommissar, and the loss of trust he'd incurred because of being a Paladin, he'd found people he actually connected to. These were, in a sense, his people, being half-Galra like him, or even simply being an outcast like Sarışın and the other armless, legless, and otherwise disabled full-blooded Galra.

They deserved better. Surely, he could find a way to do better by these people, who the Galra Empire had otherwise killed, and who-knew-what-else, before this place existed. He could help make their lives better – maybe even have a real meeting about replacing the Kommissar. Especially after he beat the stuffing out of half of them.

That was something he had to make up to them. He was a Paladin, a defender of the universe. One who helped those who couldn't be helped otherwise.

Then his eye caught Dansçı looking at Shiro in his pod. Rather, she was looking at the obvious ding in it, the blood smeared around it from the impact of Oğul's head. Shiro. His leader. His friend. His brother. Shiro deserved better, as well.

That was when Keith suddenly felt very, very tired.

He truly didn't know what he was going to do with himself.

"…I just…" He looked up at Shiro's sleeping face. "I want to get back to my team. But...I really *need* to get him back. I…need to find a way to contact them and get him off the ship before anything else happens. Right now, that's my priority before I figure out what I do with myself."

"Fine." If any of them had been offended, none of them showed it, at least. Not even Bilgin. A small comfort after what just happened. "So how are you going to do that?"

"I'll figure it out." Looking back at Shiro, Keith's face set into a determined line. "I'll call them. Somehow."

"Right." Bilgin huffed. "Call the big scary *uncontrollable* Voltron to a Galra labor ship! Full of half-Galras and Galras!"

"Yeah, sorry, but even if you could get Voltron to not blow us into space dust, that's just not going to *work*. The Kommissar would call the admiral and signal the Empire to you being here." Sarışın chuckled. "And anyways, how're you going to hide your changes? Because you're *gonna* change back."

"How long do I have?"

"Not sure, but your eyes are definitely going to be a tell soon." Ağla's head snapped up at the word *tell,* as the quadriplegic replied. "Oğul's started changing back within a *gün* or two after the headaches began. I doubt your eyeballs will be that much more obliging to resisting the change."

"I could…wear sun visors?"

"On a *spaceship*?" The look Keith was given was nothing short of

deadpan. “Yeah, no, the Kommissar would just as soon eat her fingers before she let you wear any. Unless you were actually blind. And only if she'd *made* you that way.”

Keith let a breath through his teeth as he growled. It wasn’t at them, and hopefully no one took it as a challenge. They all had a good point. He couldn’t delay the inevitable forever.

Especially if he had no way of getting off, much less knowing where he was.

“Then…if I can’t get off this ship with Shiro…I’ll consider it.”

“…*Fine.*” Oğul, and everyone else that Keith laid into, were all finally on their feet. “We should probably get to the Med Bay and fix ourselves up before getting back to our beds. Least we should do.”

Keith took a single step towards the pile of armor before, suddenly, he felt the scruff of his neck being yanked backwards. He whipped his head around to find himself staring at Oğul’s face, his eyes bright.

“*Don’t* make us regret giving you a second chance, Paladin.” He could feel the quiet anger rolling off the other as Oğul snarled. “Or Bilgin - all of us - will be the *least* of your worries.”

“…Don’t worry.”

Keith took a deep breath, trying to fight the urge to punch Oğul as he was set down. He went to grab his bayard, and stuffed it down into his suit as best as he could, all the way to his chest. As if to show how difficult it would be for him to whip it out at attack anyone without warning.

“You know the truth, now.” His voice was flat, quiet. “I’ve got nothing else I’m hiding.”

“For your sake?” Oğul kept staring at him as he pressed the panel to open the door Keith hadn’t known about prior. “I hope so.”

Each Galra looked at him as they proceeded to exit, snaking through a thin, curved, almost black hallway as they walked. Dansçı supported a limping Bilgin under her arm, while Teori held his own face. Sarışın lagged behind so she was directly behind Keith; he could feel her watching him intently, as well.

His head hung guiltily down, his eyes shifting to everyone as they

slowly made their way. He screwed up. He really screwed up, without even trying. And Shiro had wanted *him* to be leader of Voltron while he was gone?

“Oh my goodness, Oğul,” Ağla moved over to the other, lifting his head up. “Your forehead is—“

“I know, it’ll be fine,” Keith watched Oğul wave it off. “Let’s just get to the Med Bay, ok?”

Finally, the hallway ended, and the panel swung open.

Just in time to see the Kommissar turning over to stare at the group.

Oh… Keith felt his breath stop. He really, *really* screwed up. *QUIZNAK*—

“Wh—!?“ The stomp forward that she did echoed through the small hallway. “*WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE!?* **GET OUT OF THERE *RIGHT NOW*!!**”

Keith had turned to run away as the terror yanked Bilgin and Dansçı. The Kommissar didn’t grab him, but he still wasn’t quick enough to evade the guards, who grabbed him and the other curfew truants, firmly holding them against their chests in spite of their struggles. Keith couldn't help but growl, his ears going flat on his head.

"Calm down, newcomer...!"

“You stupid, *stupid*—I should *rip* your ears off your *head*!!” Then, unexpectedly, she dropped the siblings, grabbing her head and grumbling to herself. It almost sounded like she was whimpering, *panicking*. “No, *no*, I can’t do that. If only I could, you *all* deserve it, you *sub*-par…!”

Then she stared at Bilgin and Dansçı again.

“What are *you* doing on the *floor*?! ***GET UP***, you idiots!” With that, she stomped her foot right next to Dansçı’s hand. “Oğul, you *incompetent* child! *Why* didn’t you tell me *earlier* he was coming!? Now we have no time to prepare!”

Keith’s head whipped over towards Oğul, who looked just as confused as Keith probably did. Probably.

“Who’s coming?”

“The *admiral*!” That last word echoed, and instantly Oğul straightened himself up, his jaw tightening. “He’s on his way! What kind of *son* are you to not bother *telling* me!?”

“…With all due *respect*,” Keith watched Oğul’s face darken. “I didn’t know he—“

“***DON’T GIVE ME THAT!***” Instantly the overseer was up in the other’s face, her eyes bugging out. “You *yarıldı* would do anything to get out of trouble! You—you know what? No, this is *not my* fault, this is *your* problem and *you’re* going to fix it. You and your little merry band of morons! ***HAZIROL!!***”

Instantly, the guards let their prey go, and the group – Keith included, he realized with disdain – snapped to attention without a second of hesitation. With fire in her gold eyes, the Kommissar burned a hole in each and every one of their heads.

“*You* seven,” she snarled, “Are going to start cleaning this ship from top to bottom right now. All night. And when everyone wakes up, you’ll continue helping them. There will be NO dirty spots on this ship when the admiral arrives! *ANYWHERE*!!”

She snapped her heels together sharply, and ears flattened from the scratching sound which emitted as a result.

“**HAVE I MADE MYSELF *CLEAR*!?**”

Silence. Keith sure wasn’t going to dignify her with a response.

“***WELL!?***”

“Yes.” Finally, Oğul spoke, his voice flat and emotionless. “We all understand *perfectly* clearly, Kommissar.”

“Then quit *standing around* like the dead weight you are, and…*get*…”

Quick as lightning, that detestable whip cracked hard against everyone’s face. Keith hissed, feeling the slime bubble onto his cheek, mingling with his blood and heating his face. He could have sworn he saw the whip come from behind the Kommissar; for a second, he thought he saw blue spots, and then, nothing.

“***MOVING!!***” He definitely saw – and felt – the angry shove from the Kommissar, followed by her screaming at them from behind, hustling them towards the nearest elevator. “***GO!! GO!! GO!!***”

She was on them like Coran with trays of space goop, all the way to the Foundry. Keith let a small groan as he realized where he was, only to be shoved violently into a pile of scrap, further aggravating the increasingly-numb cut on his face.

"**GET UP! GET *MOVING*!!**" The Kommissar's face was turning magenta from all of the screaming she was doing, shoving herself in front of everyone, throwing Bilgin around like a ball (and away from his sister), and even tossing and kicking a horrified (and growling, after the first punt) Sarışın up the stairs. "**I WANT THIS *PILE* OF TRASH *CLEANED*!! I WANT THESE FURNACES *SHINED* UNTIL I CAN SEE MY *FACE*!! I WANT THIS FLOOR *CLEARED*!! WHAT ARE THESE *BARRELS* DOING HERE?! GET *OVER* HERE, YOU LAZY, *DEFECTIVE* PIECES OF…I DON'T *CARE* IF YOU HAVE TO TRUDGE THROUGH MOLTEN METAL TO GET IT ALL DONE!! I WANT IT DONE AND *I WANT IT DONE NOW*!!**"

Keith growled as he picked up a barrel, dragging it to another line of barrels pressed neatly against the wall. This only netted him a yell from the Kommissar about how that wasn't pleasing enough (what did looking pleasant have to do with anything!?) and he found himself moving every single barrel to the exact opposite side of the room, still growling. By the time he finished with the first dozen, he'd lost feeling on the side of his face that was whipped.

"**I DON'T CARE IF I HURT YOU! *YOU DESERVED IT*!!**" He could hear the Kommissar screaming at…actually, it didn't matter, she was just awful and none of this was in any way justified. "**SHUT UP AND KEEP WORKING!!**"

It was going to be a long night.

First the Foundry, then the Gun Assembly Room. Then, the Polishing and Buffing Station. By the time they'd gotten there, Keith couldn't feel his mouth at that point, and talking hurt too much to accomplish much. That was probably the Kommissar's intent with hitting them with…whatever the *quiznak* she used to whip them all with. Indeed, no one was talking at that point, save for the occasional whimper from Dansçı.

His face injury certainly took his mind off his headache, all the

unfortunate outcomes that would likely come of it, and even Shiro for a little while, at least. At least until he thought about Shiro, and remembered everything else, and slowed down in his cleaning. That earned him a few more kicks for his troubles through the night.

Keith and his fellow punished had just finished that third room when they heard the intercom go off.

BEEEEEEEEP** **BEEEEEEEEPP

It would have been a relief to Keith, if he didn't remember that he, and everyone else with him at that moment, were not going to be relieved from their ridiculous task.

"**GOOD MORNING.**" A loud automated voice echoed through intercoms embedded in the walls. "**PLEASE PROCEED TO THE DECK 2 B—*PSSSSSSH*—**"

There was the sound of pounding, followed by angry Kommissar sounds, and a not a little bit of feedback.

"***HAZIROL!!* THIS IS YOUR KOMMISSAR SPEAKING!**" And there she was, in all her overreacting, enraged glory. Keith let out a snort. "***ALL PERSONNEL* ARE TO BEGIN A FULL CLEAN OF THIS HOLE OF A SHIP IMMEDIATELY! ALL ACTIVITIES AND MEALS ARE HEREBY SUSPENDED UNTIL *AFTER* THE OFFICIAL ARRIVAL MUSTER WE WILL BE HOLDING FOR OUR BELOVED ADMIRAL OTAC!**"

At that moment, a guard walked in, a canister of diluted quintessence in his hands. He silently passed it to Teori, who managed a smile before the guard quickly excused himself from the room.

"**MAYBE *THIS* TIME,**" Teori proceeded to pop the quintessence open and rub it on his cheek, before going to everyone else. "**ALL OF YOU *WORTHLESS* FREAKS CAN SHOW HIM THAT HIS EFFORTS TO HELP RAISE YOU FROM THE GUTTER WEREN'T WASTED!!**"

Keith took a breath, but kept finishing up on the spot he was working on. He didn't expect Teori to come over to him. All things considered, he wouldn't have been surprised if, after this, everyone in the crew now ignored him until he finally found a way off the *İrem*. That was the best-case scenario, to boot. He was, after all, the enemy. Given what he looked like, it was almost ironic that the thing he had feared from his team on the Castle of Lions was likely true on the *İrem*, so he thought.

Thus, when he felt the cold sting of the quintessence suddenly touch his face, he turned to Teori, his eyes wide in confusion.

"…What?" Teori looked back at him, blinking. "You don't want me to treat you, now that we know yo—"

"***FURTHERMORE!!***" Both winced as the Kommissar suddenly blared out of the speakers again. "**ANYONE FOUND *SLACKING* WILL BE TOSSED OUT OF THE NEAREST AIRLOCK!! AND WHEN THE ADMIRAL ASKS WHERE YOU ARE, I WILL BE *MORE* THAN *GLAD* TO INFORM HIM OF *YOUR STUPIDITY* WHICH GOT YOU *KILLED*!! *DISMISSED!!***"

"…As I was saying." Teori brought a paw with goop on the tips up. "A doctor doesn't just let someone suffer. Its our code of honor. Even if you are an illegal Paladin of Voltron, you're still my patient on this ship. Besides, I...you could have killed us back there, no problem, the way you were going at us."

Keith's eyes narrowed guiltily, and he looked down. He didn't bother correcting the 'illegal' bit; he could probably argue about it until his face was green another time.

"You didn't, though." Keith hissed as more quintessence was applied to his face, and then to his forehead and other parts in his head where he'd been hit prior to the Kommissar finding them. "This whole time, you could have hurt us and you didn't. That's all I know, for now. I don't want to hate you, you know. None of us do. You're one of us."

Quiznak. I never wanted to like any of you. Now, I don't want to hate you, either.

Keith closed his eyes. He didn't say it out loud. He didn't deserve to say that, not right now.

"Kılıç…whoever you are, whatever you are, whatever you're planning now, whatever you're thinking, just…" A pause in the quintessence applications. "Promise you're not here to hurt us. Ok? We just don't want any trouble. We just…" Was Teori pleading with him? "…this is all I have now. The *İrem* is all any of us have. The *İrem* is family."

"…I know."

It was a mumble at best. Like Keith was speaking through a mouthful of cotton, as his face healed from the Kommissar's hit. He could feel the nerves in his cheeks start to come to life, and the blood flow less

erratically, as the swelling began to subside.

“I promise. I didn’t—” *Ow. Ok, don’t move my mouth that way for now.* “—come here on purpose. I’m not here to hurt anyone.”

Great job I’m doing so far, ha.

“…I guess that’s as good as anyone can give us, huh?” One more swipe of the quintessence to a bruise near his neck. “Look, if there’s a way to get the Admiral alone, to talk to him about getting you off, I’m sure Oğul will do it. Somehow. In the meantime, just…you know. Do what you’ve been doing. And probably start going to the Mess Hall before the Kommissar comes back and sees me doing this.”

“Uh. Right.”

With that, Teori went to tend to Sarışın, and Keith found himself walking into the Gun Assembly room, alone with his thoughts.

Keith didn’t know how long it took to clean everything else. Nor did he have a chance to check on Shiro to make sure that the Kommissar hadn’t decided to check on that random open panel she’d found the group in. Not that he needed to, since the Kommissar seemed more than fine with bring right up his butt as much as possible, screaming into his ears.

“**WHY AREN’T YOU CLEANING *THAT*!? NO, DO IT AGAIN!! HOW DO YOU EVEN CONSIDER YOURSELF A GALRA WITH THAT KIND OF EFFORT!? YOU DISGUSTING LITTLE…*DO IT AGAIN*!!**”

Which he was fine with, so long as she didn't go back to find Shiro. Also, he was fine with it so long as she didn’t whip him again. Whatever she used to whip him was debilitating at best, and he couldn’t help but shudder at the worst-case scenario from his first night on the ship. His failure to escape, and his slow poisoning and paralyzing, from the wounds afflicted on his back.

The Mess Hall. The Galley and Kitchen. The Capsules. The Med Bay. The Firing Range (this ship *actually* had a firing range? How did he not find it before this!?). Not the Bridge. No one but authorized personnel were allowed on the bridge, namely Sarışın, Oğul, the

Kommissar, and the disfigured navigators (not that they could actually get out of their seats *to* clean, Keith thought - they were at least safe from this inane stupidity). As Sarışın went to leave the Firing Range, once the area was cleaned, Keith felt a stump patting his back.

“To the bridge I go. See you later, kiddo.” The quadriplegic gave him a look that Keith just couldn’t figure out. Was she mad at him? Sad? Disappointed? Amused? “Don’t do anything *I* wouldn’t do!”

“…Right. No problem.”

"Good! *Bwa*haha!"

He would just take it as encouragement, and hope no one who had been in the room that night would reveal the truth about him. Which they had every right to do, all things considered. There was little else he could do.

Yet they didn’t. They didn’t, he realized, as he finally finished cleaning a single hallway and another announcement suddenly blared through the intercoms.

“**GESS *İREM*, THIS IS GESS *SÜREYYA ZIZIFUN*.**” A low, deep, smoky, and decidedly unfamiliar male voice echoed into Keith’s ears. And through the halls. “**WE ARE APPROACHING BASE COORDINATES FOR AZIMUTHAL DESCENT, OVER.**”

“***İREM* TO S.Z., WE ACKNOWLEDGE.**” Oğul’s voice responded to the newcomer. “**PREPARING CARGO AIRLOCK FOR TAXI TRANSFER.**”

“**…GOOD TO HEAR YOU, COMMANDER.**” The unknown voice responded, more quiet. “**ESTIMATED TIME OF ARRIVAL IS 10. I WILL BE BOARDING, OVER.**”

Keith’s breath hitched. So, this was it, right? The Admiral – the man responsible for the very existence of the *İrem,* and the continued existence of almost everyone who was on board her - was really coming on board. He was about to face a high-ranking member of the Galra Empire’s military – one who was, in some manner, enough in the graces of the powers-that-be to face Zarkon, both as a Paladin and as a half-Galra. Quite frankly, his fate would be in that man’s claws.

He closed his eyes. He'd been mostly lucky so far to not be killed by the experience. He could only hope, as he felt the *İrem* shake beneath him from the other, incoming ship, that his luck would still hold.

Saldırı

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BEEEEEEEEP** **BEEEEEEEEPP

The alarm, which always sounded before the morning muster, echoed on the ship, six times. There was no indication of where to go to gather. Keith didn't need the directions at that point; every morning, the muster location was the same: The Deck 2 Bow.

I can do this.

His head was pounding more than ever. His eyes were starting to hurt, and all the cleaning chemicals he'd been using were making him dizzy. That, on top of the lack of sleep the previous night, were starting to get to him.

He quietly leaned against a wall, took several deep breaths, and count to ten. Then, squaring his shoulders, he continued forward, one step at a time.

I have to do this.

He squeezed into the elevator, his tail squashed against the wall. Nearly every crewmember was in the elevator, save Oğul and Sarışın. He could feel Bilgin's glare on him as the big man turned towards him, obvious irritation still written on his face. Could see Ağla and Teori looking back at him, every so often. There was a tension in the box that had not been present before, a silence that begged to be cut, and Keith had no doubt he'd contributed to the somber, nervous atmosphere among the crew.

How long would it be before everyone knew?

"Are you afraid?"

His head turned to face Dansçı – of course, of all people. She looked far less relaxed than she had when she'd invited him to her secret room. In fact, her cheeks looked flushed as she stared at him.

"You oughtn't be." She immediately turned her head away from Keith, the moment his eyes connected with hers. There was a small hint of

bitterness in her whisper. “The admiral is all right, even if he won’t believe *me* on anything. I’m certain he will accept you.”

“…Thanks,” Keith mumbled quietly, feeling several eyes look over at him. “Hope he does.”

The elevator opened, and everyone quickly filed out. Everyone filed in and stood according to their colors, as usual. Even the navigators, usually not around during the muster, were present on the floor; their chairs were, of course, on the purple sash end of the line, their feet, hands and heads lolling in their sockets quietly. And, standing in front of all of them was a perfectly-standing-at-attention Oğul, his hands behind his back, followed by a less-than-perfect-and-in-fact-her-stumps-might-have-been-on-her-hips Sarışın.

Finally there was the Kommissar, who snapped her heels together, her chest puffed out and stance stiff and all-business. Perfect for the admiral, of course.

“***HAZIROL!!***” Everyone who could quickly snapped their heels together, standing ramrod straight. Keith himself straightened his back, his right eye quietly fluttering from each pounding heartbeat that thumped into his left temple. “Admiral is on board!”

There was the sound of heavy footsteps at this. Three to be precise. On the fourth, from around a corner, a large, muscular Galra appeared. The first thing that Keith noticed, as he attempted to look without obviously moving his head, was the lack of a right eye, and the clawed-in, almost star-shaped scar around where one otherwise might have been. The eye he did still possess gleamed a bright, almost canary yellow.

The fact he was clad in the black-and-red suit with the Lion eyes insignia was less impressive to Keith, than the fact that Sarışın’s story about how he saved his son – Oğul – *might* have had a grain of truth to it after all.

“Be at ease, soldiers.” Admiral Otac’s was the deep and smoky voice that had hailed the *İrem* on the intercom, and he turned to look at Oğul, though his voice still projected towards the group. “Be at ease. Commander, report.”

At this, Keith saw Oğul tense up considerably.

“…We have added three new recruits to, and lost one of, our crew compliment since your last inspection, admiral.” His voice was stiff,

authoritative, rehearsed. Wait, who else was new—*what*ever, that didn't matter right now. "We currently stand at fifty-eight enlisted hands, twelve non-commissioned guard troops, and the Kommissar overseer. Our manufacture quota is only 0.005 behind schedule. We await your further orders so we may further the glory of Holy Zarkon and His Galra Empire."

At this, the Admiral's expression softened, and he walked over to place a hand on Oğul's shoulder. Much to the surprise of Oğul – and from where he was standing, Keith.

"You do realize 'at ease' applies to you as well?" The Kommissar cleared her throat with an annoyed glare, but the Admiral simply smiled, even as Oğul's face flushed dark. "One day, you'll prove to be a fine admiral indeed. For today, though, let us just relax in these trying times."

There was a silence, at this. Oğul simply looked up at his dad, his face still flushed, his mouth set into a frown. On his end, a small shadow crept into the admiral's expression, though, as Keith watched, it lacked the obvious frustration that was practically slapped on the younger's.

Sadness? Regret? Everything the admiral had hoped for imploding in front of him repeatedly over the *yıl*? All of that and more?

Keith could only wonder if that look on the admiral's face was akin to how other parents to half-breeds felt when confronted with the reality of the *İrem*. That their children weren't going to be furthering anyone's glory, and that any accomplishments they might have hoped to achieve would be less than worthless to anyone outside of the ship. That they were prisoners to their own identity. Everyone knew it. Keith now knew it.

He had to wonder if he'd been kept on Earth to prevent something like this from happening to him. If his…well, his relative ancestor, he just had *no* idea who exactly his family's Galra blood donor was, save they were on his mother's side…if they had considered something like the *İre*m to be a possibility, or if they just preferred not to have their family wiped out entirely.

He supposed he wouldn't know. He may have hated uncertainty in general, but in this one instance, he had to concede that maybe ignorance was bliss.

"—Admiral!" He didn't have any clue how much time had passed with

his thoughts before the Kommissar's voice brought him back to reality. And caused his eye to twitch. He did notice that the officer was coming right towards him. "If I may, I should reiterate that I unfortunately had to manually finish Midshipman Kılıç's Processing due to the fact he was *deficient* in presenting his documentation and *properly*—"

"All right, all right. I am well aware of the circumstances from your original message, Kommissar. That will be all." The admiral's eye was right on him, observing him quietly. Sizing Keith up, to see what he was. "Kılıç, yes?"

"…Yes." *Stop twitching, eye. Quiznak, stop*— "That's the name I was given on board, sir."

"Mm." The admiral's eye narrowed, just slightly. "Does your eye normally twitch like that, Midshipman?"

"No, sir." *Keep your voice level. Don't let this guy get to you. He's just a superior officer. He's not the first you've faced.* "I...just didn't sleep very well last night."

Silence, as the admiral just kept looking at him. Did he suspect? Did Oğul tell him the truth, before he came out? Or—

"…I see." There was a nod, and a smile, as Otac continued down the line. "Teori, if you would, make sure he is given proper rest tonight for his duties. Kommissar, you may ease up on your duties for the evening, as well. I'm certain you would agree that a tired soldier handling molten metal is a *very* bad idea."

This resulted in the Kommissar sputtering a reply in the affirmative, even as she shot an angry look at Keith. Well, ok then. He gave her the tiniest of smiles back, before looking straight ahead again. The Admiral couldn't be too terrible if he ticked the Kommissar off. After all, how *dare* Keith be given time to *sleep* during normal sleep hours!

Of course, judging by how the Kommissar was leveling death in his direction, he was likely going to pay for his affront. If he survived to the evening without the admiral ripping him apart for being a Paladin. Likely he'd do it after he finished slowly going down the line, speaking to the crew, and then get him alone to finish the job quietly.

He could hear a few of the things he said as he went down the line, and at least understand what was being talked about. One blue sash, he quietly admonished for not finishing a job they'd promised to do

when he last came; another, he commended for fixing something on the ship that no one else had noticed was awry. To Ağla, he warmly requested a crock of her breakfast soup to bring back onto his flagship - apparently, some of his crew had never tried it before - if she had the time to do so. To each crewmember, he individually spoke in low, quiet words, and the further away he got, the less distinct the words became.

Keith frowned, his ears twitching. Was it just his imagination, or had his hearing actually weakened since the previous night? Unfortunately, he couldn't be sure.

"…I don't think I can truly speak to how proud I am of this ship, and everyone on it." Finally, Admiral Otac stood back, addressing everyone. "I know that what you do would be considered thankless by many in, and by many outside of, our ranks. I know, also, that it may seem that Holy Zarkon is always looking to other important matters concerning the empire, and not so much to us…"

Oh, that was definitely a coughing scoff coming from Sarışın's direction, worsened hearing or not.

"...But you must know, your work is important, and cannot be cast aside so easily. Our line of weaponry is used by thousands of soldiers, and that number increases every day. I'm certain, as I look at all of you, that yours will be the generation that sees final victory and real peace, for the first time in the universe's history, under the Emperor's wisdom and grace."

There was a small smile on the admiral's face, and Keith could see the gleam of his eye look towards Oğul. It was clear, at least to Keith, who exactly he was referring to.

"The enemies of peace know how important we are." After looking back to the crew, the admiral's smile dimmed. "That's why I've come here, to speak to you all personally. It appears that those who would de-stabilize our empire have started to encroach this part of space once more. And they currently control the most powerful weapon our empire's enemies have. An arsenal that, up until recently, had only been a legend. A myth. A bedtime story. But I'm sorry to say that I've seen them appear, with my own eye, not even a week ago. And they are coming this way."

Voltron.

Keith's eyes – twitching and otherwise – widened at this, and he could

hear the fearful murmurs that resulted from this revelation. Could feel his own sweat start to form underneath his fur. His eyes darted around, spotting Oğul staring at him.

Unsurprisingly, Oğul didn't look very happy with Keith.

"The *Lions*…!?"

"Oh no…!"

"I can't believe it!"

"Are they going to eat us!?"

"A-admiral!" Someone – Keith was pretty sure it was Geçit – suddenly spoke up, loudly. "Is this why we are in Helvicta territory?"

That earned him a death glare from the Kommissar, who opened her mouth, ready to scream.

"U-um." Dimmed as his hearing might have been, Keith could hear the gulp coming from Geçit's throat as he squeaked. "Sir?"

"I'm afraid so." The admiral closed his eye and nodded, holding a hand up. Everyone instantly quieted down at this. "We ourselves have very little in the way of protecting the *İrem* from a direct Lion attack. So, for the moment, we will continue our cruise within the main Helvicta system."

That seemed to placate the crew, for the most part. Keith began to suck in a deep breath of relief.

"Don't worry, my crew. The people of this territory have been our allies for yıl, and their fleet will help protect us. We *will* be safe here."

And they were, for one moment at least.

Then came the loud, screeching ***CRAAAANCH*** in the very next instant, causing such a violent lurch and tilt on the ship's axis that everyone and everything was tossed into mid-air. Keith barely had time to finish his breath before he was smashed into a wall like a rag doll, his head hitting metal hard and producing floating, flashing stars from the spots in his eyes. He was unable to react, even as a navigator's chair barely missed his head by inches as the unfortunate sitter let out a piercing scream and was dropped onto the floor back first.

The scream, and all the others that accompanied it, became fuzzy, like it was coming from a tube inside a can buried in bubble wrap, with only the ringing of his ears having any clarity. He could feel himself rolling back onto the floor, could see bodies going everywhere, could comprehend the vibrations of the ship groaning under whatever had just happened, and could watch the lights flickering on and off wildly.

Things moved, sounds were silent, and Keith wasn't entirely sure whether he was going to black out or not.

Quiznak…quiznak…quiznak…

The next thing he could conceive, with his hearing popping back and his other senses rebooting, was Oğul's hands grabbing at the collar of his suit and slamming him against another wall. No, wait. Not just a *wall*, how did he get into the *elevator*? And where were they stopped, for that matter?

"…—lthy, rotten—!" Oğul's eyes were practically on fire. "I *never* should have trusted you, you…you *Paladin*!!"

"Nm…" Keith shook his head, his own eyes rolling around in his skull as he tried to regain full sense of what was happening. "G-geez, why don't you tell me how you *really* feel?"

"*SHUT UP!*" That earned Keith another slam into the wall, and Keith could feel something in his tail snap but good at the impact. His head also felt a little warmer in spots, meaning he was bleeding, just a little. "This is all your fault! We're all gonna die and it's *all your fault*!" Oğul's voice cracked. "*Why!?* What did we *ever* do to—"

"**ATTENTION, SHIP OF FOOLS.**"

Oğul's tirade instantly stopped at the sound of the deep, guttural, even growling voice that echoed on the increasingly static intercom. His eyes widened, and whatever hatred he had in his eyes was slowly replaced by fear. His hands began to shake, just slightly, as they held onto Keith's suit.

"Wh…what?"

Keith's own eyes narrowed, just slightly, at the sound of the voice. What indeed. Something about the voice had a touch of familiarity.

"**IF YOU'RE STILL ALIVE TO HEAR THIS,**" The growling continued. "**THAT UNFORTUNATE HIT YOU JUST TOOK WAS WHAT**

REMAINS OF THE *SÜREYYA ZIZIFUN* SMASHING INTO THE PORT SIDE OF YOUR HULL. AFTER I BLASTED IT AND EVERY SKEEFING MEMBER OF THE CREW *STUPID* ENOUGH TO REMAIN ABOARD INTO ITTY-BITTY BITS, OF COURSE. I WOULD NORMALLY BE SORRY ABOUT THAT, BUT RIGHT NOW? I JUST DON'T *CARE*."

"That's…Bok…!?" *Ogul*'s head whipped to the left, then to the right, then back to Keith. "Impossible…why is *he* attacking us!?"

"…*Who?*"

"The leader of the Helvicta Corsairs' entire fleet." *Ogul* began to pin him again, his voice becoming frantic again. "The de facto *ruler* of this sector of space. Does he know you're on board!?"

"What do you mean, 'does he know'?" Keith couldn't help but scoff, bringing a hand to his head. "*You* didn't even know!"

"**I WOULD ALSO SUGGEST NOT TRYING TO RUN, LITTLE *İREM*. I HAVE 40 OF MY BEST SHIPS SURROUNDING YOU. AND…**" At this, the voice became bemused. "**WELL, IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING IT TO *YOU*, ADMIRAL, BUT THE NEAREST IMPERIAL SHIP THAT COULD POSSIBLY RESPOND TO ANY DISTRESS SIGNALS YOU MIGHT *ATTEMPT* TO SEND OUT OVER THAT *RADIO* OF YOURS IS, OOOH, THIRTY TACHÉA AWAY. IF THEY EVEN BOTHERED TO ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR EXISTENCE, THAT IS. WHICH IS *MORE* THAN ENOUGH TIME FOR ME TO BLOW YOU INTO SPACE DUST, I THINK.**"

"Then what is he doing attacking us!?" *Ogul* finally let go of Keith, bringing his hands to his head. "What other reason…could there *be*!?"

"**OH, AND I AM ABOUT TO BOARD YOU AS WE SPEAK.**" As if on cue, the ship began to rumble. "**SO, TO ALL YOU *SKEEFS* AND RETARDS ON BOARD, DON'T TRY AND RESIST ME OR MY MEN. ADMIRAL, YOU MAKE SURE TO TELL THEM TO DO AS I SAY, RIGHT? JUST SURRENDER AND DO WHAT WE ASK, AND WE'LL LET YOU GO ON YOUR HAPPY WAY. BOK OUT.**"

The two half-Galra stared blankly at each other as the intercom abruptly ended, leaving the two in a silent elevator.

"…They're going to kill us. Kılıç…" Oğul's eyes darted down to the floor. "They are going to *kill us*. That's the only reason Helvicta Corsairs ever board a ship. They're going to kill us and they're going to kill my…*my dad* and then…I…he…*we*…!"

Slowly, the other fell to his knees as Keith watched, covering his face with his hands, and ears drawn back. Some of his words were incoherent to Keith's ears; it was probably better that way, he realized, as the commander let out a muffled, undignified wail.

"…as if we never existed all over again…!" Oğul's voice finally came out clearly from within his claws. "I told my dad to…I *told* him this was bad. I *knew* this was going to happen! Now, they—"

"*Stop.*"

Keith shook his head. He got where Oğul was coming from, sort of. He got that it sucked. He could see how easy it was to just fall apart in the face of something like this, especially after so many years of… nothing. Or repeating the same motions in anonymity because of an accident of birth.

On the other hand, now was the *absolute worst time* to fall apart.

"…Commander." He seriously meant it. Total sincerity with using the title. Everyone at the Garrison would probably laugh at him if they saw him doing that now, at least until he punched and clawed everyone in the face. "I know who can help us."

"…No." Even crying, Oğul shook his head. "No, no, I'm *not going to*—"

"Listen." Keith instantly dropped down onto his own knees. "You don't have a choice. If what the admiral said is true, and he means what we think he means? The other Paladins are in range to intercept these guys and stop them!"

The ship shook again, harder than before.

"We can contact the Castle of Lions." Keith's voice quickened its pace, as if the pirates could bust into the elevator at any moment from all sides. He offered his claws out to the other. "We can convince them you're not hostile. When they see what's happening they will *do* something. I *promise*, they *will* help save the *İrem*."

Oğul didn't look up at Keith, as he slowly wrapped his claw around Keith's wrist and began pulling himself up. Keith quietly nodded; he knew that the poor kid in front of him was quietly just collapsing inside at what was happening to him. The idea that he had to call on the enemy of the Galra Empire to save them had to be an extra-bitter cherry on top of the ice cream that was the past *gün*.

Er, day.

"…If this doesn't work," Ogul finally rasped as his other hand finally tapped on the top of the elevator panel, fingers curling up in an odd position. The panel lit up, turning a bright blue, before Keith felt the box start shooting upwards. "If we end up being targeted anyways. I *will* kill you before Voltron or the Helvicta have a chance to."

"Fine. Deal."

Ding.

"You can do whatever you want to me."

"…The bridge is down this way."

With that, Oğul roughly dragged Keith by the wrist that had been offered down a hall. Out of all the places within the *İrem* that Keith had visited, this was, without a doubt, the most like the Galra ships he was familiar with. There was no extra paneling, no mishmash of parts, no hiding places. Just a smooth, quick trot to a sliding door, and into the purple glow of the bridge and its control panels, outfitted for the wheelchaired individuals that were, at the moment, not there.

Into a view of space, for the first time in forever. Keith's eyes widened, then squinted, as he saw the scenery beyond the cockpit window the light momentarily blinding him. Once he was able to blink the irritation from his eyes – no easy feat, as the pain from his apparent de-Galra-ing headache was now pulsing in time with the pain in his tail – he was suddenly wondering if what he was seeing was a hallucination.

Beyond the cockpit windows, surrounded my countless stars, was an asteroid belt in front of them, of giant rocks of multiple shapes and sizes and colors, all of them with what looked like blue stripes. Beyond that was a giant purple planet with Saturn-esque rings of blue flecked around it. Directly below them was a bright green planet with swirling white clouds in its atmosphere. It all twinkled in the blue light of the supergiant, hanging high in the distance, itself ringed by a light, foggy halo.

A *navy-blue* sun.

"Kılıç!" His attention was brought out from the surroundings and to Oğul punching furiously on the pain control panel, while pressing panels on a black, square box beneath the panel as well. "I'm opening

up the distress channel frequencies and filtering them through our communicator oscillation variable emitter."

"Your *what*?"

"…Our radio system has a special hacking device – the only one on a ship in whole of the Galra Empire - that allows us to alter our communicator's radio waves as we please. Its bends radio waves in all directions, even able to bend waves to silence. Its how we're able to send transmissions to Admiral Otac – and the corsairs - without being detected by anyone else." A low buzzing sound came from the box, before a light blinked on and off. "Do you know the Voltron's direct encryption channel?"

"Voltron doesn't *have* a direct ecryption frequency." Keith rubbed his temples. "Voltron doesn't work like that. Its not a ship. We need to contact the Castle of Lions."

"Right. Then, this…Castle of Lions' direct encryption. Which GESS channel nu—" At this, Ogul stopped, then growled. "Right. They don't have one, right? Not GESS-affiliated."

"Just send out a general distress signal." Keith watched the other's fingers fly, then looked up at the bridge's translucent monitor. There sure were lots of red dots surrounding that one purple dot. "The Paladins will answer any distress signal that's sent out, that much was drilled into me. And if you can get me on audio or speaking or whatever, I'll take it from there."

"I can if they respond, and you better." Oğul looked up at the monitor himself, blanching at the sight. "I can overcome the wavelength cutoff imposed by Bok's ships for a few *dakika*, and vary it as much as I can to keep from going silent. But…even if the corsairs can't hear your chatter once the signal starts going, they *will* know the signal's going. They have a similar emitter on all of their ships, they…*they* invented this. Made this one for the ship. The second they figure out who you're calling, that you *are* calling for help—"

"They won't. I'll cover that if they ask who we were calling." Keith paused, before taking a deep breath. "Ok, ready when you—this won't go to the whole ship, too, will it?"

"Not a properly-encoded distress call. The crew's already panicking." Oğul slid his hand up the sides of the panel. "…All right. Stand by."

With one last press of the panel, a red circle flashed on the screen,

replacing the map. It blinked three times before turning solid, with the box's lights following suit. The distress signal was being sent out. Keith looked over at Oğul, and saw him looking back. Some of the anger and fear had melted from his expression – though not all – and was replaced with steely anticipation. Keith turned back to the signal, back to what was an eternal waiting game for a response, and took another deep breath. In, out. Just like that.

He could do this. *They* could do this. They *had* this. They—

"***OĞUL!!***"

Then the Kommissar came in, all sound and fury with her heels smashing against the floor, and Keith's heart stopped.

"The admiral is captured! I have been ordered to take y—" Then she saw Keith at the controls. "***WHAT ARE* YOU *DOING HERE!?*** *You're* not authorized to be on the bridge!!"

"I'm calling for help!" Keith grit his teeth as he turned back to the console. *Not now, don't pull rank now.* "Do you have a problem with *that*?"

"And who *exactly* are you calling in the middle of *pirate territory*, you idiot whelp!?" He could feel the Kommissar's presence slowly suck out the hope from the depths of his marrow. Apparently, pulling rank and blood on him was more important than living to her. "Kılıç?! Who are *you* calling!? Tell me *this instant*!!"

Keith didn't respond, instead setting his jaw, staring at the signal.

Come on, guys. Coran, you have to be monitoring things on the bridge, right? Allura? Pidge? The whole Castle has to be able to hear a distress signal, right? They're…they're there*, right?!*

"I won't be ignored by the likes of you." He could hear the whip snap menacingly on the floor. Keith still refused to look. "I'm your *better*, do you hear me, *yarıldı*!? And *I* won't be killed because of *your* mistakes!! So *LOOK AT ME AND* ***ANSWER ME!!***"

"Or else what?" *Come on, guys, the Paladin Code, you have to answer this—!* "You'll kill me?"

There was a deadly silence. Then, there were heels, stomping slowly, purposefully, towards Keith's back. Then, a bone-crunching slam onto his shoulders, as the Kommissar whipped him around to face her.

“Since you asked so *nicely* to be punished for your *idiocy*.” Keith’s eyes widened at the absolute venom in her eyes, as they burned brightly with hate. “*Maybe I will—*“

“Oh, *shut* up for once!”

The Kommissar’s face came up, and turned just in time to see Oğul’s fist slug her hard in the mouth. She dropped Keith, staggering back with a screech of anger and shock from the impact.

“Besides, *I’ve* got dibs on killing him.” Oğul wagged his hand in pain. “Pch, she’s got a hard jaw.”

Just then, the distress signal pinged again, and turned green, followed by a surge of static.

“**…in living color. Hello?**” Just then came an unexpectedly wonderful sound, sweeter than the Kommissar staggering back awkwardly on her heels. A familiar, yawning voice crackling to life on the bridge’s sound system. “**Hellooo? Hey, this is the Castle of Lions! We’re responding to your distress call, who is this? What’s the problem?**”

“…Lance…!”

Keith instantly turned back to the console. He couldn’t have been happier to hear that voice at that moment.

“*LANCE!*” He shouted, slamming his hands into the console, hoping that, beneath the obvious octave shift of his voice, his self-appointed rival would hear him. “Lance, it’s me! Can you hear me!? We’re in trouble…!”

“**Wh—**“ Of course, Lance sounded confused. Of *all* the times to be his usual himself—! “**Yeah, I hear—wait a minute…how did you know my—**“

“**Lance? I heard the beacon alarm, wh—**“ Allura. “**Wait…that’s a Galra ship’s signal! It might be a trap…Coran? What do you think? Should we ignore it?**”

No. He could hear the Kommissar begin to shove Oğul aside, growling as she did. *No, no no no—*

“Allura! WAIT! *Please*!” Keith’s voice became desperate. “This isn’t a ruse! I’m on a ship of civilian workers, the GESS *İre*m, and we’re being

attacked by corsairs! You *need* to come to our coordinates *immediately*! Please, acknowledge!"

It wasn't *entirely* true. The crew weren't technically civilians. But whatever he had to do to get them here.

"Kılıç." He could hear the Kommissar's voice come dangerously close behind him. "Get away from that console *right now*."

"**Wait, wait a tick.**" Keith could hear the gears going in Allura's head, could feel what her silence meant. She was getting it, she had to get it… "**That sounds like—!!**"

"Yes, *yes*!!" The Kommissar swiped at him. Missed when he stepped aside. He knew she wouldn't miss the next time. "Allura, it's me! Its *Kei*—"

He was cut off by the sudden shattering of the console in his hands, sending sparks and flames onto his hands as it, and the emitter, was set alight with bright purple flames. He was force to jump away, as the screen was next, blasted into pieces by a purple bullet of energy. The entire navigation panel sparked with energy, smoked, and then was still.

"***NO!!***" Keith landed on his already-damaged tail, letting out another cry as he did. They were cut off from their only hope. "No…!"

"You…"

He turned to look at the Kommissar as she sputtered, her head and body slowly turning towards the bridge doorway. She held her hand to her torso, over a hole that went clean through from her back. As her mouth move, a line of blood began to trickle down the side of her mouth.

Blue blood.

"*What*…" He couldn't see who she was addressing. He could only watch her try to bring her whip out – which, he realized, as the blue-spotted, tentacle-y *thing* began to ooze slime, was her *tail* – and futilely attempt a defense of her life. "Why…are…you *doi*—"

One last laser blast to the forehead silenced her completely, covering her face with blue blood and purple energy as she collapsed to the ground like a lifeless doll. The tentacle-tail quivered, letting out one more *sploosh* of slime, mixed with blue blood, before laying still.

“Get up, you.”

And then he was grabbed by his ear and pulled up, resulting in a very undignified yowl, pain shooting into his face and amplifying his headache. The one grabbing him was a rather large and brutish-looking figure in a tight black suit, three large, glowing, diagonal blue stripes on the chest plate. In his other, free hand was a mid-sized laser Galra gun. No – the Heretic.

“Nice try, drudge.”

Keith winced as he watched Oğul get dragged from the bridge by another large figure, trying to kick out of the bear hug he was caught in without success, before he himself felt his ear be set free. Before he could take advantage and run, he grabbed by the scruff of his neck and immobilized. He let out an angry hiss as he felt himself go limp.

“Let’s go.” He was dragged out of the bridge room; once he was, his captor turned and shot the door panel, rendering it useless. “You’ve got a *meeting* to attend, and attendance is *mandatory*! Heh…heheh…”

The pirate’s partner, still holding Oğul, let out a scoff.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Hah, man, so what? I make myself crack up sometimes.”

“Yeah, you’re a real *comedian*, aren’t you.”

That came from Keith, and this earned him a smack to the head with the butt of his captor’s gun.

“Kılıç—“

He blacked out as he heard the elevator doors open.

Chapter End Notes

ATTN:
File: Topal/Copal and File: Ahtapot have been declassified. File: Kılıç has been updated.

Toplantı

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"…ou...ke up…*HEY*!"

The next thing Keith registered, as his mind was roused back to consciousness, was a smack on his cheek. As if his head and face hadn't received enough trauma and his headache hadn't gotten worse over the past….wait. How long was he out and where the *quiznak* was he now?

"Wakey wakey, drudge." Oh. Right. *These* guys. Keith's eye twitched up again. "No sleeping. Our captain wants to speak with you."

Keith shook his head, holding his temple as his eyesight gradually returned, and he took in his surroundings. He was in the theater, sitting somewhere in the middle rows, with Oğul sitting next to him, his position askew as if he were thrown down. All in front and behind him were seats filled with the rest of the grey-suited crew like him, purple and blue sash alike. There was no order to the seating, no regimented blood segregation. It was first-captured, first-seated, apparently. The only one of the *İrem* that was standing was Admiral Otac, sporting a darkened expression and a new bruise to his cheek. He, and the navigators, were in the front, facing everyone else.

There was no sign of the *İrem*'s military guard.

"Right then." The muscled pirate stepped back from Keith, nodding towards the back of the theater. "They're all yours, sir, Jabon. We've got the whole lot here now."

Jabon?

The deep voice from the radio rumbled from behind Keith, and two sets of feet began to descend the stairs, as the reedy voice responded. Something about the voices – and the name – felt familiar, from a situation far removed from the one he was in now. He couldn't place it. Why did this feel familiar?

Then, with the slamming pulse of his headache, he remembered.

"Surely, once they realize that what they're looking for is gone…"

“Things change, Jabon.”

The two figures he'd overheard from the derelict ship all that time ago. Keith sucked in his breath as he fit the pieces together. The pirates had a pact with the admiral. The derelict ship was a chimera of multiple ship types, cobbled together. The pirates had built the *İrem*.

He hadn’t *just* encountered random pirates from the Helvicta fleet that night, had he?

“Admiral Otac!” The reedy-voiced figure – Jabon – went first, all six arms stretched out as they descended down to the front of the room, their three eyes disingenuously large with shock. “This is a surprise. We certainly weren’t expecting *you* to be on board, but since you *are*, it *is* a pleasure to meet you again.”

Otac didn’t respond, instead looking at Jabon’s boss. Indeed, everyone was looking at him, Keith included. He was hard to miss – the Galra was massive, height eclipsing even Ağla’s, and his build akin to a space Adonis, as he strolled in. Aside from the long goatee on his chin, and the dark brown suit, he could have passed for Zarkon’s body double in those ridiculous propaganda stories from the ship’s recreation rooms.

He didn’t speak, instead slowly walking, clearly taking his sweet time on purpose. He looked down each and every row as he did so, and Keith felt a chill of worry in his chest as he watched the Galra’s glowing eyes look over at him. There was nothing but contempt in his expression as he continued on.

Finally, after an eternity, the corsair strolled leisurely to the front, planting himself in the center, gun unholstered. He then opened his mouth and spoke.

“*Vrepit sa*.”

The crew was silent, as with Keith, as he looked over the group, as if to see if anyone flinched. Then, he laughed, his guffawing rasping akin to a smoker’s.

“You *skeefs*.” He shook his head, his fanged, pearly-white grin gleaming in the light of the theater. “You’re all funny, you know that? Even now, you’re all scared big bad Holy Zarkon’ll swoop in and bite your heads off if you respond to me. They're just words! Everyone knows that! Do *you*? Just…that’s what I like about you. You always know how to make me laugh.”

He turned his head to the side, nodding.

“Aaaah…yeah, lots of good times. Good relationship. You give me a shiny letter of marque, keep the Empire off my fleet’s back, give me some…” Patting his gun, a hint of admiration in his voice as he did. “…*really* nice weaponry. Can’t count how many *skeefs* I’ve knocked off with this before they even knew I was there. It’s some good stuff you designed here, Bilgie boy.”

There was a growl in the crowd at this. Namely, Bilgin’s, before it cut off when a pirate’s gun was pointed at the back of Dansçı’s head.

“In return, I supply you with the Blue, the nicer slop, the alcohol—“ He seemed to be looking at Sarışın’s direction as he said that one, even though Keith couldn’t see her from his vantage point. “—the… slightly less legal things you halfies and gimpies aren’t usually allowed to have…all in all, an…open, honest and beneficial business arrangement!”

He turned to Admiral Otac.

“Wouldn’t you agree, Admiral?”

“Bok.” Otac’s voice was firm and steady as he looked at the privateer. “You just blew up my ship. Whatever you’re planning, you lost whatever leverage power you—“

“Oh, no no *no*, don’t give me that.” The Galra – Bok – never faltered in his smile as he waved the admonishment off. “Your son’s attempt to call for help – not bad, kid, but no dice. Besides…”

He looked up at the crew, eyes narrowed.

“Who else would have heard you but the legendary Voltron, huh?” The smile faltered, and Keith felt a lump in his throat. “Funny how, all of a sudden, they have an interest in *this* sector of space, isn’t it, Admiral?”

“If you have a *point*, Bok,” The admiral’s voice sharpened. “Please make it and be on your wa—“

"I wasn't finished *talking*."

Cue the pirate stomping over and smashing Otac in the face with his weapon, and gasps coming from the crew. Oğul nearly jumped out of his seat; Keith’s hand was instantly on the other’s shoulder, holding

him down before he could get too far. Turning to look at Oğul's angry face, he shook his head.

Much as Keith wanted to beat the pirates up – oh, *did he*, his blood and ego was just *aching* for revenge for the console panel and the hits to his head (and…maybe the Kommissar being killed, too, he *supposed*, in spite of what she did and what a terrible person she was, and maybe he'd wanted a piece of her too—) – his mind won out. Too many guns, no way to prevent mass death.

"Don't insult me, admiral." Below, Bok hissed. "You might lose your other eye next time."

At this, he looked up, any joviality in his expression gone.

"Now as I was saying." Bok licked his lips. "One of you in this room has something of mine, and I want it back. Jabon, show them."

With a nod, Jabon's arms took out a remote from his suit, and clicked it on. A full-sized holographic picture lit up on the floor in front of Bok, turning slowly in full-circle. Once it processed in his mind what the picture was, Keith's breath hitched.

Shiro!?

"A little friend told me, that he sold this…specimen. We'll call it…'Champion'. For *giggles* since I doubt any of you would get why." Bok pointed to the picture, his claw going through it as he began to pace. "Chaos in the universe is profitable, I will say. I had a great idea for my specimen, and I was pretty close to kicking them off, too. But then, one day, it was *gon*e. And the little friend I had was at fault. He told me this specimen was sold to someone on this ship. Right before I jetted him into space for doing so, and…well, I don't like it when a partner does business behind my back. *Especially* when it involves something that isn't for sale!"

"Bok," From behind him, Otac coughed as he stood Keith spotted some blood on the edge of the admiral's mouth. "As much as I understand your anger, no one could have possibly *bought* an individual on this ship, much less without me knowing! The GESS *İrem* has a strict policy on contraband, like all Imperial ships—"

That got a scoff from the corsair.

"…I do not allow *unauthorized* contraband, and I don't condone such —"

“Oh, you *don’t*, do you?” Bok shook his head in disgust. “Condemnation about buying others for your own use is certainly *rich* coming from you.”

“Don't be like that. They signed onto this of their own will. Everyone on this ship did.”

“Just like me and the other miners on Helvicta Prime did, right.” There was a darkness in Bok’s voice as he spoke, and for a moment, Keith was certain the pirate really would blow Otac’s head off then and there. “You can pretend you’re an upstanding military man to others, but spare *me* your false indignation, Otac. I lost my entire mining facility in Suntala, you lost chances to turn more halfies into your slaves, and Lions are on the horizon.”

Thus, more puzzle pieces fell into place for Keith. He brought a hand to his face. If it was not to massage his headache which just pounded harder from this revelation, then it was to cover his mouth to stifle the gasp threatening to leave his mouth.

“All because of one of your *skeef*ing crew decided crossing me was more important!” His gun turned towards the *İrem* crew, and the other pirates began to cock their weapons. “So, *now* I have to get my prize back and take it to a secure facility, and finish what I was starting with before anything else further inconveniences me!”

No. Keith’s mind raced. *No, I can’t let that happen. I can’t let them take Shiro again…!*

“And I will blow this ship after I’m done with it,” Bok’s shouting became an angry roar. “If the responsible crewmember doesn’t come forward *right now*!!”

Still more silence from the crew. From the corner of his eye, Keith could see Dansçı start to shake, just so slightly. In her spot, he could see Ağla bow her head down. Was she praying? Was that the only recourse she could think of in this situation?

One of those who had been in the room the previous night could have spoken at any time, to save their ship. Then again, Keith realized, any promise of safety from Bok was likely a lie, now that he had felt crossed.

“What?” Bok stalked forward, clearly getting angrier. “Do you think I’m j*oking*? Maybe you think that hiding him in any of the ancillary alcoves is going to stop me from finding him?! *I made* this ship, I *know*

where those spots are and the rest of my men are looking as we speak!"

Nothing. Suddenly, Bok grabbed a random crewmember from the front row — no, not a random crewmember, that was *Hemşire* — and shoved the gun underneath his chin. Keith saw the glimmer of fear in Hemşire's eyes as Bok held him fast, despite his attempts to struggle.

No no no quizn—

"Commander Bok, *no*—!!"

Teori's pleas as he leaped up did nothing, and Keith's eyes shut just as Bok pulled the trigger. The shot still echoed, even as he heard Hemşire's body falling to the floor with a thud, and screams began to permeate through the air from the crew at the sight. His own thoughts flashed through the moments with him during his time on the ship, and he let out a shaky breath.

Hemşire. He'd been one of the first he'd met when he'd woken up. The last of a clutch of 45...one of only two who had made it onto the ship.

Keith opened his eyes again. Without even missing a beat, Bok had grabbed another from the horrified audience — Ürkek, it looked like. She let out a whimper and shut her tear-filled eyes as the gun went to her chin, though he didn't not pull the trigger. Not yet, at least. Oğul tried to stand, but was shoved back down by a guard, who held a gun to his head to make him stay where he was.

"**DO *NOT* TEST ME FURTHER, *SKEEFS*! IF MY MEN FIND HIM BEFORE ONE OF YOU SPEAKS UP**," he screamed. "**I *WILL* START DECORATING THIS ROOM WITH YOUR FEEBLE BRAIN AND ORGAN MATTER!**"

Teori was also shoved back into his seat, tears streaming down his face. Ağla's head was bowed down even further; Dansçı was clearly wilting from the pressure of keeping quiet; even from behind Bilgin looked ready to jump up and tear the guards apart. Keith couldn't see how Sarışın was doing.

It didn't matter. The situation was rapidly disintegrating, and now the crew was dying.

"**I WILL ASK *ONE* LAST TIME!!**" Bok pushed his hostage's chin up angrily with the barrel of his weapon. "**WHERE! IS! *THE CHAMPION*!!?**"

“He’s dead.”

The tension instantly deflated – not fully, but just enough for Bok to violently throw the weeping Ürkek to the floor. Everyone turned to look at Keith; every set of eyes were wide.

“…U-um.” Keith’s eyes darted all over, and his ear twitched like mad as he slowly stood up. The gun that was pressed to Oğul was now pressed to his head. “*Hi.* I’m Kılıç. I’m new! And…I don’t know who… bought him, or why, but…I was working in the Foundry, and I…uh…I *might* have pushed his pod into one of the furnaces…thinking it was a…big piece of scrap…”

Keith could feel Bok’s attention fix right on him, and he was glad looks couldn’t kill. Otherwise, he would have spontaneously combusted that moment.

“…not realizing….anyone…was in it…until…” Every other corsair in the room began to walk over to him, guns drawn and pointed. Oh, well, even if Shiro *wasn’t* dead, Keith sure was going to be soon and he knew it. “I, um, heard him screaming as he disintegrated into molten sludge.”

He let out a sigh, and shrugged, waiting to be ripped apart by lasers.

“Sorry?”

Bok let out a roar as he stomped forward. Three steps later, and he had yanked Keith out of the row by his hair. Keith let out a yelp as another hand curled around his neck, and his face was practically smushed against Bok’s. The loud growl emanating from the pirate’s through caused Keith’s nose to vibrate.

“I’m going to rip your tongue out and eat it in front of you, you stupid *skeef*ing cub,” Bok seethed. “If I figure out you’re lying. Maybe I will anyways, if you’re telling the *truth*!”

Please don’t ask Ağla. Please don’t ask Ağla. Please…

“Jabon.” Bok turned to the front, eyes narrowed and ears flat. “Call the search squads, verify they haven’t found the Champion or the cryo-pod on this ship.”

I’ll take that. Keith was pretty sure the pirate could hear his heart thrashing wildly in his chest. *Don’t find Shiro. Don’t find Shiro. Don’t—*

“Squads, give me your updates…squad one is negative. Squad two is negative.” Jabon was holding an arm to the side of his head; he had some sort of receiver in his auditory system. Every moment or so, he would speak again. “Squad three is negative. Squad four is negative…”

Bok’s expression didn’t soften. If anything, Bok looked more ready to blow Keith’s brains out, as more squads turned up negative.

“Squad six is…wait.” Jabon’s eyes widened, and the tension in the room suddenly skyrocketed again. “Squad six, what is happening? What did you—“

Jabon never got the chance to finish his question, as the ship was suddenly rocked again, this time towards the bow. The pirate guards staggered and fell; Jabon was tossed on his face. Even Bok nearly lost his balance.

“Kyaa!”

“Oh god, are they shooting us again!?”

As if in response, the ship shook again, albeit less violently. It was accompanied by static crackling on the *İrem*’s intercom system, and the sound of distant shouting.

“WHAT!?” Bok shook Keith as he roared. “WHAT JUST *HAPPENED*!? SOMEONE ANSWER ME N*OW*!!”

“**ATTENTION, HOSTILES.**”

A voice suddenly cut through the fuzzy din, echoing loud and clear in the theater and throughout the ship. Keith let out a shaky breath; he’d know that voice anywhere.

Yes.

“**THIS IS PRINCESS ALLURA OF THE CASTLE OF LIONS. THE SHIP YOU HAVE TARGETED IS NOW UNDER THE PROTECTION OF VOLTRON. ABORT YOUR ATTACK AND RETREAT IMMEDIATELY, OR WE WILL HAVE TO RESPOND WITH AN ALL-OUT ATTACK.**”

YES!

At this, the blue and purple sashes – those that could, at least – began to stand up. Their body language and words were of confusion and

shock.

“V-Voltron!”

“Voltron’s…saving *us*!?”

“No way…!”

"I must be dying...this isn't real!"

“**DISENGAGE FROM THE SHIP AND RETREAT! THIS IS YOUR FINAL WARNING!**”

“Voltron…” Bok’s grip on Keith’s tightened, choking the air out of him. “*How did they **FIND** US HERE*!?”

Keith let out a gasp. He needed to get out. He needed to get out and get Shiro before the pirate goons did. And he wasn’t going to do that being asphyxiated by the psycho holding him. So, he did the best thing he could think of.

He kicked what he hoped was Bok’s crotch as hard as he possibly could.

“***KYAAAAAAA!!***”

Right as his leg began to swing, he heard an animalistic screech, and out of the corner of his eye he could see Sarışın flying – not jumping, *flying*, like someone *threw* her – right on top of a guard, her bared fangs sinking into their throat. He could see Otac take advantage of the enemy’s shock, and rush the nearest guard, claws completely unsheathed into their side.

Then he was dropped by Bok, who collapsed with a howl from the hit to his pirate jewels. He landed on his feet, and immediately his hand was dropping into his suit and grabbing his bayard.

“**RIIIIOOOOOT!!**”

Keith’s attention was again turned towards the quadriplegic. Spewing green from her mouth, Sarışın grabbed the dead guard’s gun with a stump, popped it right off of like a doll with her stump, threw her head back, and let out a great, primal scream. How was she so strong!?

“**RIOT FOR OUR LIVES, GIMPS AND WIMPS!! NO ONE GETS THE BETTER OF US!! *BWAHAHAHAHA!!***”

That was more than enough incentive for the crew of the *İrem*; several had already started to push back against the guards, letting out their own screams of rage, allowing their blood to boil and catapult them to a state of fighting frenzy. Oğul used Keith shoulder to catapult himself over the theater chairs to deliver a kick to Bok's face, though he was then swatted away by the Galra's beefy paw.

"Oğul—"

"…Go." Before Keith could summon his blade and cut the pirate's head right off his neck, Oğul shouted at him. "Go, hurry! Before he *kills you*!"

"Wh—"

And then Bok was starting to recover. He was looking around, one hand covering his private area, seeing Oğul but clearly ignoring him. Who was he—

Him.

Quiznak.

Keith beat feet the second he figured it out. The crew…they could handle these guards, right? And the ships outside were being handled by the Lions of his friends, if the constant shuddering of the ship was any indication. And the sooner he found Shiro before Bok or his men could, the better.

He sliced his way through two surprised pirates as he bounded to the elevator, smashing his hands on the panel. He knew which deck to go to. The same as the Foundry. Deck 8, if he had it right.

He was flying out of the elevator as soon as the elevator slid open. His blood was screaming and his adrenaline was pumping as three pirates spotted him.

"Hey!" The pirates had their guns out. It wouldn't matter. "Stop—"

Keith's bayard slashed through lasers and legs alike, and he kept going after his enemies fell. His feet pounded on the floor, and when he nearly passed the panel where the black hallway was, he nearly skidded to a halt.

It was open. *Open.* They didn't. They couldn't have. Not so fast.

No—

He ran down the snaking black hallway, breath heaving with fear at what he would find. Was Shiro alive? Who—what—would he find?

“Shi—NGH!!”

His left foot promptly slipped and twisted on a blue liquid, and his bayard flew out of his hands as he fell to his knee. His bayard banged against glass and promptly de-formed into its idle form in a blast of red, clattering to the floor.

He’d barely had time to look up and recover, before the heel of a foot planted itself right onto the base of his spine via kick. Letting out a cry, he crumbled to the floor, convulsing from the pain, as another quick kick hit him a side, followed by a shout of rage from his attacker.

No, quiznak, NO!

And then the kicking stopped, and footsteps receded from him, down the black hallway and out into the rest of the ship. Keith, down on the floor, retched and heaved several drops of blood from his mouth as he looked up, his eyes focusing on the carnage in front of him.

Dansçı’s wall – really, the whole room – was completely trashed. What wasn’t ripped off from the wall and scattered about was covered in more blue substance, which also covered the floor. It also covered the half-dozen pirates that lay on the floor in front of him. Some were clearly unconscious, others were somewhat less so.

One of them was sans their gun.

Keith’s heart stopped as he looked up at the cryo-pod. The small ding from Oğul’s head had spread, cracked, and broke since the previous evening, slowly leaking the cryostasis substance all over the room. What was left of the glass panel was also open.

And Shiro wasn’t inside.

Keith’s hand instantly went to his aching side, feeling traces of cold liquid where he was kicked. Looking behind him, he could see increasingly faded footprints, traced in glowing blue. He didn’t have to look particularly close to realize the prints were human in shape and size.

Which only meant one thing.

Keith's breath quickened as he forced himself up, staggering to his bayard. Grabbing it, he re-activated it and stumbled out of the room before any of the still-hopefully-alive pirates with him could wake up and stop him. He probably had a rib or two bruised at the very least from the surprise attack, and who knew how his spine was going to come out of this. That didn't matter, though. Not with the much more urgent matter now at hand.

Shiro was finally awake.

Awake, alone, and one-armed, on a ship filled with Galra Empire personnel, with a *gun*.

Chapter End Notes

ATTN:
File: Sarışın has been declassified.

Elveda

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Quiznak. Quiznak. Quiznak…

Keith dropped onto a wall as the ship rocked again. He had to admit, as happy as he was that his friends had arrived, he wished they could be a *little* more gentle with their rescue mission. He didn't know what exactly was happening outside, since he obviously had no windows with which to see out of. Still, he had to believe that they were surely kicking some pirate butt, and that it wasn't Voltron getting destroyed.

Right? Right.

Now all he had to do find Shiro and prevent him from murdering everyone on the ship that was not a pirate. Including him. It was like every insecurity he'd had from before was right before him, every fear engendered from the moment he learned the truth about his heritage, were all out in the open, playing with him. Mocking him. Reminding him that, in the end, Shiro could never truly accept what Keith was, deep down, no matter what, and the next time they met might really be their last.

That Shiro, after *everything*, really might ki—

~PALADIN!~

He practically yelped as, suddenly, a voice echoed through his brain. He grabbed his temples and shut his eyes.

"What the *quiznak*—who—?!"

~PALADIN!!~ Keith's eyes lit up as he realized who – what – the voice was**.** Indeed, he could feel the ship rumble from her roar, even if he couldn't hear it, coming from the outside. Felt triumph and victory and images of outside, where ships and Lions alike waged battle.
~AT LAST! I SHALL COME FOR YOU! I SHALL BLAST A HOLE IN THIS SHIP AND FREE YOU!~

~Red? Red!~

His joy at feeling his connection with his Lion revived, after so long of

hearing and feeling absolutely nothing, was replaced with panic as he realized what his Lion was actually saying.

~…Wait, no! You can't get me! Not right now!~

~YOU ARE HURT.~ His Lion was obviously not inclined to agree with him. ***~I CAN FEEL IT. I WILL NOT LET WHAT HAPPENED LAST TIME HAPPEN AGAIN. LET ME COME FOR YOU!~***

~Red, I…you can't. The Black Paladin's on this ship.~ Letting out a groan, Keith started hobbling again. He could hear a growl coming from the Lion at the mention of Shiro. *~He has nothing to protect him from the vacuum of space. And…the people on this ship…~*

He trailed off. He felt his mind project some of his own feelings about the crew of the *İrem*. Friendly. Scared. Not quite the enemy.

~…If what you say of the Black Paladin is true, he is not responding. The Black Lion senses nothing in their bond.~ After a silence, his Lion spoke again. ***~You are certain the Black Paladin is with you?~***

~Shiro…~ A pirate suddenly fell on him, out of nowhere. No, not out of nowhere, his wounds were making it hard to focus on incoming problems. Still, he dispatched the attack with his bayard, doing his best to project the memory of Shiro inside the cryo pod to his Lion. *~He's on the ship, but he's not himself. His mind's…he's lost in fear. Waking up on this ship, with Galra…he…don't be angry. He attacked me.~*

Another swipe of his bayard, and the pirate was down. The Red Lion was silent.

~I'm…a Galra now. And he didn't recognize me.~

~…Yes. I feel it. You are changed. Like Zarkon.~ Keith rubbed the mist from his eyes as he felt his Lion speak. Saw images of their fights together, of their first meeting and their last battle. ***~But not like Zarkon. You are scared.*** **Do not be.** ***YOU ARE STILL*** **MY PALADIN.~**

"Heh." He said it out loud as the sound of lasers filled his ears in the real world. "Trying not to be."

~Save the Black Paladin if he is there. SAVE YOURSELF.~ The Lion let out a roar. ***~I WILL FIGHT THESE SHIPS WITH MY BRETHREN,***

UNTIL YOU ARE FREE!~

“Kılıç!”

That was when he heard Teori’s voice cutting through the Lion’s voice, and he turned to see Teori. He was with one of the twins, frantically trying to wrap her shoulder with what looked like a piece of torn suit. Her...so Topal. Behind Topal’s chair, Keith could also see a pair of exposed, unmoving purple legs with flecked scales. Hemsire’s.

Bakici and Copal were nowhere to be seen. Had they been separated in the fight when it spilled out of the odeon? Or-

“Kılıç, cover me.” Topal let out an incomprehensible squeal, and began to flail an arm, as Teori tried to grab a hold of it. “Please! *Cover me!*”

Keith heard a shout, then saw a laser zip right over Topal’s head. The result was a panicked, ear-piercing screech from the chair-bound navigator. The guard then spotted Keith as he ran forward, aiming his gun away from the injured.

One deflection of blasts with the bayard, and a knee to the pit of the attacker’s stomach sent them to the floor.

“Topal, we need to go to the Med Bay right now.” The gnarled Galra let out a sound of protest. “Topal, *please* don’t argue with me, you’re hurt!”

“*DUCK!*”

Teori grabbed Topal’s torso and buried her head into his chest, covering her even as Keith stabbed a pirate that had jumped out of a hidden alcove. Taking his sword out of the falling body, he turned back to Teori.

“…Don't worry." Keith let out the breath he'd somehow been holding. "I can get you both to the elevator.”

“Its…its right there.” Teori shook as he unfurled from around the navigator’s chest and looked over at the Paladin. “It’s ok, we’ll be ok.”

“…Right.” Keith could feel the tension rolling off the two in front of him, and his shoulders sagged as his head went down. “Right. Got it.”

“This isn’t your fault.”

And Keith’s head popped right back up.

“…What happened to Hem—Hemendra…this wasn’t you.” Slowly, Teori moved to pick up the body of Hemsire. “If you hadn’t done what you did…I think we’d honestly all be dead by now.”

Keith took a step forward to help; Teori shook his head.

“We’ll be all right. Really.” Topal floated towards the doors as they opened, Teori following him. “Listen, if you’re hurt further, and…you know, you’re still alive when this is over. I’ll be in the Med Bay.”

“…Yeah.” Keith was fine. His injuries were nothing no matter how much they hurt right now. He’d be *fine*. “I know.”

“Hey. Paladin.” The elevator let out a pin as Teori walked in, turning around to face Keith. “We…*were* wrong about you, weren’t we?”

Before he could answer, the doors closed.

“*Quiznak.*”

As Keith proceeded to the other side of the deck, he found several more guard bodies piled up along the way, this time with laser holes in their armor, smoke rising from them. He tensed up as he made his way to the elevator, past the bodies, bringing his hand to the panel and mashing it several times.

Several more bodies met him as the doors opened, tumbling out and blocking the way. All of them shot in the chest, some in more than one place.

Was this all Shiro’s work? It couldn't *all* be him, could it? *Could it*?

Shiro. He pushed the bodies that were preventing the doors from closing out of the lift, before pressing a button to go…well, it didn’t matter the deck. *What are you going to do when you see* me *again?*

Worse. Was it *just* the pirates he was shooting at, right at that moment?

He'd get the answer soon enough as the doors opened up to complete pandemonium in the Gun Assembly room. Several dozen bodies were strewn everywhere, pirate and crew alike. On the top of the pile was Ağla, her glassy eyes staring right at him, gun swiped from the finished piles still in hand and a large hole in her side above her hip.

Keith let out a strangled gasp as he came forward, only to be cut off by laser fire.

"For the love of…*TAKE COVER, YOU IDIOT*!"

Sarışın's voice echoed through the room as she shot at another pirate who popped up from under a desk. Another shot, and Sarışın let out a yelp.

"Oh no! You…dis-*armed* me!"

Then came shots from the ground, shooting the pirate in the head.

"But you didn't de-*feet* me! *BWAHAHA! **I'M SO BAD**!!*"

Finally, Sarışın crawled out from behind the parts crate, toting guns on her feet stumps with complete ease as she stood up. Said stumps clicked on the safeties, as well, as she hobbled over on her stump equivalent of her heels.

"Ok guys, whoever's on my side still alive in here, you're clear! That was the last one."

Keith began to walk forward as several crew members in the pile of death began to move and mumble. To his shock, Ağla was among them, slowly blinking several times before focusing her eyes on him.

"Kılıç...?"

"Ağla." He stared at her, disbelieving. "You're still alive!?"

"Oh! Of...mm...of course I am. I was just playing dead." She tilted her head, wincing with tears in her eyes. "I might need to be carried to the Med Bay, though. I think...no, I'm certain my hip was shattered by that shot. Oooh..."

"I can do it." Another crew member – Mimar – went to grab her, looking up at Keith. "Oh, hey, Kılıç, is it…is it *true* you're a *Paladin*? With *Voltron*? They…they're really *helping* us? You don't, like, grow extra appendages or have secret bombs? Or, um, eat baby Galra at

night?”

Keith groaned at this.

“…Ok, that...that was a dumb question, wasn’t it.” Mimar winced nervously, looking away from him. “I was just kidding. Kind of. W-we all know you like eating Ağla’s breakfast soup anyway, and, uh, that doesn't have baby in it. Heheh...”

“I keep forgetting I can’t keep any secrets on this ship for too long, don’t I?”

“Could be worse! But we know you’re on our side right now, at least.” Sarışın chirped to Keith as she used her stumps to help up another groaning crew member with a hole in their arm. “Anyway, it’s a good thing I realized it *was* you before I de-brained you. Last creature that ran in here like you did was the crazy hairless pale thing that shot Ağla and, like, five of the corsairs before running back out.”

Shiro. Shiro *shot*—

“Wh…” Keith’s head frantically flew back towards the doorways, towards the elevators. “Did you see where he went?!”

“No clue, but if you hear angry, incoherent screaming you’re probably on the right track.” Sarışın waved one of her foot stump guns. “You want one, by the way? You might need it.”

“…No.” Keith held up his bayard. “I’ll be fine, I've got my weapon. Teori’s in the Med Bay so…you guys should get there.”

“Of course.” As Ağla was picked up with a grunt by Mimar, she looked Keith up and down. “You should consider going there too. You don’t look so good yourself.”

“I’m fine.” His ear twitched. “Just a bit scratched up.”

“…Oh, Kılıç,” Ağla sighed as she was carried out. “Speaking the truth really suits you better. You’re still a *terrible* liar.”

Soon, the other surviving crew members, grabbing some guns, also filed out, avoiding the dear bodies piled on the way. Only Keith and Sarışın were left.

“…Well, Kılıç?”

“Huh?” Keith turned to face the quadriplegic. “Well, what?”

“Don’t you have a crazy hairless pale thing to stop?”

“Erm.” Keith’s ears flattened. “Shiro’s a *human*.”

“Then you should go stop the crazy hairless pale *human* before he goes off on any more of our crew. Yeah?”

Silence.

“I’ll do my best.” Keith took a deep breath. “Just…look, he's my friend and I need to get him off the ship anyways. If you see him again, don’t engage him. Just get out of his way next time. Please.”

“Nope, sorry, no can do. No promises I won't blast him if I get a clear shot, kiddo. He's attacking crew members and I don't let that slide.” Sarışın crawled over to another pair of guns, holding them in her hand stumps before turning back to him. “Now get outta here and go find him and get him out of here if you want to keep him in one piece. Before he shoots someone else, or I find him."

Keith gulped; he knew she wasn't bluffing. He could see how deep her frown was.

"What about you?"

"Psh, *me*? Don’t worry about me otherwise. I’ll be fine.”

All four stumps clicked on the safeties of the guns as she stump-jumped out of the room.

“They didn’t call me Sarışın the Slaughterer back in my pirate days for nothing, you know! *Bwa*haha!”

His muscles were starting to ache. His head was screaming for relief. Of course, his injuries were bothering him, but he could tell his body was starting to vigorously protest the lack of rest. He huffed and puffed as he got off the elevator again, this time back on the Mess Hall’s deck.

There was still no sign of Shiro. He could be dead, for all Keith knew.

Don’t think like that. Hearing the sound of lasers flying nearby again,

Keith held up his bayard. *You will find him. You will stop him. You will get him out of this alive before someone gets him.*

That was when he heard an angry war cry, and a gaggle of pirates crashed through the doorway of the Mess Hall so hard that they snapped the door panels clean off.

"***HOLY ZARKON'S ETERNAL WRATH UPON YOU!***!" Right behind them was Dansçı, who did a flip on one hand – her other hand holding something wrapped in cloth – and leaped onto one of their necks, snapping it in half with a twist of her heels. "***DEATH TO HIS ENEMIES!!***"

Even before the body had fallen, Dansçı was throwing herself at her next attacker, this time slamming him into a wall, before turning to face the final two offenders. She was able to pick up and throw the first, before she spotted the second whipping out their gun.

"Dansçı—!"

She was hit, hard, in the side, letting out a gasp. Shot again as she fell. The pirate aimed for a final shot, as Keith rushed forward, bayard swinging.

A blast of purple nearly took his hand off, and that of the pirate's.

"*DANSÇI!!*" The next thing Keith knew, Bilgin was flying in with a roar, throwing something metal at Dansçı as he proceeded to punch the pirate right in the face. "***LEAVE!! MY!! SISTER!! ALONE!!!***"

Dansçı let out a shaky gasp as she caught the metal thing, holding it like a cannon as she aimed it at the pirate's head, pulling at a rigged string mechanism dangling at the end of. As the shooting end of the weapon glowed purple, as Bilgin leaped back after pounding the attacker, and a large, blasting pulse shot turned the marauder's head into a pile of glowing purple pulp, Keith let out his own gasp as he realized what the jury-rigged weapon actually *was*.

Shiro's arm.

They were *using Shiro's Galra arm*.

"HEY!!" He saw Bilgin stepping towards him, eyes narrowing menacingly. "What do *you* want, *Pal*adin!?"

Keith turned his head from the giant angry ball of scientist, and

looked instead at Dansçı. She was breathing heavily from her wounds, and the moment their eyes met, she protectively wrapped her arms around the cybernetic limb.

“Dansçı.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Y-you can’t *have* it, dear Kılıç. Its mine, now. My brother *fixed* it just for *me*.”

“Its Shiro’s.”

“It’s better with me than it was with him!“

“Its not…yours.” Keith held his hands up the moment he heard Bilgin’s very unimpressed growl come closer to him. He tried to keep his voice level. “You know having that won’t change Zarkon’s mind about you. You know that, don’t you?”

“I don’t…” Hugging it tighter, even though it started digging into her wounds. “Sh-shut up! This is all I have. Its my *proof*. Its my key! You *don’t understand*, I’m going to be *free* with it…I…”

She started crying, one of her feet stomping on the ground. Keith stared at her; she looked less like the warrior who had just snapped a neck with her bare feet, and more like a scared child having a temper tantrum. He couldn’t help but feel just a little sorry for her, even as he shattered what little denial she thought she could hold onto.

“You little…”

Suddenly, Bilgin began to grab at Keith’s scruff. Oh, right. Dansçı’s brother was *watching* him break her heart and probably her mind, as she lay grevously wounded!

He was going to be dead now, wasn’t he?

“*Why* do you keep making my sister cry!? Do you have a death wish!?”

“*Ghg*ghh…” And instantly Keith’s body went limp. “Dansçı. You know Zarkon won’t care what you show him. He doesn’t *care* about you! Zarkon only cares about himself! He—“

He was promptly backhanded by Bilgin, and his ears rang again as he was slammed into a wall. Dansçı’s sobbing only grew louder.

“*SHUT UP*! YOU JUST WANT TO HURT MY SISTER! YOU JUST

THINK SHE'S *CRAZY*!!"

"Guh…" Keith's eyes twitched. "Zarkon…will kill her…if he saw she…had…mm…"

He fought to stay conscious. He still had to find Shiro. The rest of him, at least. He couldn't black out now. As it was sounds were distant and fuzzy compared to the high-pitched squeal of his eardrums. He could barely hear the voices of the siblings as they talked. He didn't know what was being said. He only knew it was about him.

Stay awake. Come on, Keith! Stay awake! Stay—!

The next thing Keith knew, he was back on the floor, right back on his aching tail. As the breath was knocked out of him, something heavy hit him in his privates. Something metal. Shiro's arm.

He hazily grabbed it as his hearing came back, and his eyes focused on Bilgin's towering silhouette stomping off, the softly crying Dansçı in his arms.

"…ucky my sister is here to save your sorry, worthless, *yarıldı* tail," Keith's hearing came back, and he could hear the rage in Bilgin's voice as it receded from him. It was worryingly calm and measured. "Just take it. Just take it and *go*. And don't *ever* show your face to me *or* my sister *again*. I don't care if you're on our side or with this crew, I *will* kill you next time, *Pa*laidin!"

Keith didn't need to be told twice. As soon as he could, he sat back up with a groan, and began to limp in the other direction that the siblings went, carefully cradling the arm in his arms. He could tell that there was work done on it, but also, that whoever had wrenched the arm off in the first place, had not done it cleanly. It almost looked sawed off, with bits and pieces of wire hanging from the open end, along with the pull-string trigger that Bilgin had obstensibly added.

…*I'm coming for you.* Keith's own shaking fists clenched. *Shiro. I'm going to find you before things get worse!*

After that was a deck-by-deck search. At that point it didn't matter the order he went. Just go up, then down, then up, then down. He'd

search as many places as he could, save one. No choice but to avoid the Med Bay, where Bilgin had hopefully brought Dansçı.

Hopefully she'd be all right.

There were progressively less and less pirates around, as he kept looking. At least, less living pirates – there were certainly plenty of bodies strewn around, and their numbers seemed to be replenished less and less as the moments ticked by. Keith had to wonder if this was because of Voltron; Bok had certainly shown how easily he could board the ship, after all.

Soon enough, he'd run out of decks to actually look through. The only ones he'd not looked on were the bridge, and any of the other decks he didn't have access to. There was no way to get further.

Unless.

His increasingly pained head went back to when the Kommissar had been killed. Those pirates had to have gotten access to the bridge somehow, right? The fact that the Helvicta corsairs were able to take over the ship with such ease must have meant that the corsairs were able to access most of the ship's functions. They *did* build the ship, after all.

With a grunt, Keith dropped Shiro's arm and took the hand of a stiffening pirate inside the lift, dragging it up to the deck panel. The panel instantly lit up to a bright blue, revealing several more bottom parts of the panel that, before, hadn't appeared.

He thumbed the lowest one, keeping the dead pirate's hand on the panel as he did so.

The elevator shot downwards. After what felt like a long minute, the doors opened, revealing a huge room, littered with crates, with lasers shooting around from one end to another. At the very end of the room, several transport ships were spewing smoke, and a particle barrier was up where a set of bay doors lay open. Beyond them was nothing but the blackness of space.

The cargo hold!

Grabbing up Shiro's arm, Keith went into a roll, aiming the hand towards the group of privateers that were firing behind an open crate of Heretic guns. Pulling on the newly-added trigger string, Keith felt the arm convulse, then hum as purple power began to build up in the

opening hand. Once it felt ready to go, Keith let the string go.

The crate was obliterated, snapping in half as it flew into the air, much to the shock of the corsairs who had taken refuge behind it. Before they could react and attack Keith, however, they were shot down by laser fire coming from behind another set of crates.

“KILIÇ!” Keith heard Oğul’s voice over the din of lasers. “Over here!”

Fast as he could, Keith hobbled over to the position of the crew members. Oğul was missing a substantial piece of his ear, and one of his hands was noticeably missing fingers and claws. Next to him were a contingent of a dozen crew members, all firing at the dwindling number of intruders.

Keith blasted three more of them with the arm-cannon. The last attempted to run away, but was put down with an accompanying cackle from – of course – Sarışın.

“*Bwa*haha! Nice blaster you got there, kid.”

“Not mine.” Keith hobbled to Oğul. “You should get to the Med Bay.”

“I was going to say the same thing.” Oğul weakly tossed his spent gun aside. “Have you seen my dad?”

Keith blinked. Looking for Admiral Otac had been at the very bottom of his list once he realized Shiro was on the loose. He could only shake his head.

“No.”

“No sign of Bok, either.” Oğul flopped to the ground. “Lost him when I bunkered here. No way he could get off the ship with the barrier up and…we think the fleets being handled by your Lion friends. He’ll have to turn up sooner or later. My dad too. I hope.”

He took several deep breaths.

“Unless he left already.”

“’Left’?” Keith’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean? There’s a barrier up, there's no way he could get through unless he bypassed it?”

"No, not bypassing that..."

Oğul looked over at Sarışın, who simply shrugged.

“I mean…he may have found a way to use the emergency escape pod.”

“Th—“

Keith nearly jumped at the words. He didn’t say that. Oğul *didn’t just say—*

“*Emergency escape pod!?*” Keith’s voice squeaked and he didn’t care. “But Sarışın said there *weren’*t any—“

“—for *us*.” Sarışın nodded. “Its true, *we’re* never getting off this ship. But there *is* one on this ship that only Admiral Otac is capable of accessing for his own use, in circumstances like this one.”

“But—thi—“ Keith stammered and sputtered at this revelation. This horrible, horrible revelation. “You mean I could have gotten off this ship the *entire time*!?”

“No.”

“What?” Sarışın frowned. “Don’t look so mad, we didn’t lie about it! I just said it was never intended for us, seriously.”

“You don’t have the proper clearance to access its location, anyway.” The response from Oğul was flat. “The hallway its in is specially sealed in multiple places that only certain individuals can open. It requires genetic and password verification. And honestly, you technically shouldn’t be down *here*, either. None of us should be.”

He slowly stood up.

“There’s only three people in the entire universe who can open it up and know where the entrances are. Bok and Admiral Otac are two of them.”

He hobbled to a wall, where a large crate lined the wall. Quietly, he leaned his maimed hand against it.

“**HELLO, COMMANDER.**” A blue panel suddenly came to life as the blue blood from the injury splattered onto the crate, and a pleasant-sounding female voice spoke. “**PLEASE COMPLETE THE VERIFICATION PROCESS TO CONTINUE.**”

“Wh—“ Keith started. “What are you *doing*!?”

“*Bwa*haha!” Sarışın hobbled over to him, patting him on his leg.

“What does it *look* like, Kılıç?”

“But I need to find Shiro-“

"Don't worry, if he's that important to you, I won't kill him." The purple sash paused, then nodded. "I'll just take out his legs beneath the knees so he'll stop running!"

"*What!?*"

"He can live on leg stumps." Sarışın shrugged nonchalantly. It was clear from her contemplative tone that she wasn't joking. "It's not *that* hard."

"But-"

“Shut up, you guys, the program needs to hear me,” Oğul grumbled as he turned back to the panel. “Activating access code O-Ğ-U-Z Z-I-Z-I-F-U-N.”

“**ACCESS CODE ACCEPTED.**” The crate’s side suddenly slide inward and sideways, revealing a small passage. “**THANK YOU, COMMANDER OĞUL.**”

Keith stared at Oğul, then at Sarışın, who was still patting him.

“…This is really happening. You’re really doing this.”

“You want to get back to the Voltron people, right?” Oğul kept his face turned from Keith. “If that’s the case, this might be the only chance you have.”

“How will you explain it to—“

“If my dad’s still alive, I’ll figure it out.” The other’s face became quiet. “But…what I do doesn’t matter. You need to go if you still can. You know it and I know it. Right now, you’re not safe with us…and we’re not safe with you."

Keith looked down at himself at Oğul’s words. Oğul was right, of course. No matter how invested Keith might have gotten with those one the ship, he knew that his presence on board only increased the danger. Even if Voltron left without him, the pirate attack and the loss of life couldn’t go entirely unnoticed, even in this sector of space, even with the noticeable absence of Zarkon. However the Empire was going to shape up as a result, it still endured – and so, too, did the universal

enemies of Voltron.

He had promised that if he had to, he'd just let himself become a Galra permanently. He had seriously considered it. Now, however, that option seemed moot after all.

"Oh, right. Almost forgot!" Keith felt something slipped into his hand by a sweaty stump. "Ağla wanted you to have this before she finally passed out. You know, if you ever have a hunkering for her breakfast soup…"

Keith looked down at it. It was a holographic board, with what seemed like slightly-drunken Galra script scribbled on it. The last line ended with a long line, as if the person who wrote it had their writing implement slide down off the bottom of the page.

"Guys." Keith felt his eyes get just a little misty. "I…I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything, Kılıç." Oğul was quiet as he stepped away from the opening. "You don't have to. I…I order you to go, as your senior officer. Our rematch will just have to wait."

"What Oğul's trying to say is, you're a good kid, you probably prevented mass casualties on our side with your quick thinking, and he's sorry you're a Paladin on the other side." Sarışın brought her stumps behind her head. "Also, he's going to kick your butt the next time. And, you need to lick my boots for *real* before you go for letting your friend live!"

"…Really?"

Keith looked down at Sarışın's feet stumps. She obviously wasn't wearing boots, and her leg stumps looked sweaty.

"*BWAHAHA!!*" The quadriplegic slapped her leg stumps after a moment. "Oh man, you actually fell for that!! After everything, *you still fell for it*!!"

"…Ha." Keith couldn't help but let out a small chuckle. Even with the threat to Shiro's life and limbs clearly hanging in the air. "Heheh…"

"I'll take a hug, though." She nevertheless held her arm stumps up. "*That* I'll actually order you to do!"

Keith bent down and did so for a good long moment; Sarışın was

pretty squishable. And still sweaty, but then again, he was hardly much better. He was probably worse off than Sarışın.

“Ok, ok, let’s not get *too* emotional.” She pat him on his arm. “You better get going, right? And if you do manage to get off and anyone asks, we’ll just say you exploded.”

“…*Exploded*? How—”

“Come on, come *on*.” Keith was dragged from the tetra-ameliac, and placed into the crate. “Get going. You’re running out of time.”

“I know, I know,” Keith mumbled. It was hard to say good-bye, of all things. “Oğul, I—“

“The pod’s in Cargo Hold 7.”

“It’s—“ Keith’s ears went up at this. “Guess you weren’t entirely lying about that, were you?”

“The hallway’s the only way to access all auxiliary holds on the ship.”

Oğul took a deep breath.

“Also, before you go. It…was good to have you aboard.”

Keith watched him move to close the door. He realized if he wanted to say anything else, it would have to be now.

“Oğul. I have a message for everyone.”

He quietly stiffened his pose, bringing his hand up for a sincere salute to his aching forehead. They deserved to have the message. Even if only Oğul and Sarışın would hear it.

“*Vrepit sa*.”

There was a look of surprise on Oğul’s face, and on Sarışın’s. The panel closed on Keith just as Oğul’s mouth broke into a sad smile.

With that, for the first time in what felt like forever, Keith was plunged into darkness, alone.

Chapter End Notes

ATTN:
File: Oğul has been declassified.

Kaçış

You can do this. You can do this.

In the darkness, Keith could feel his injuries and headache start to overwhelm him. That, combined with the lack of sleep, was getting to him more and more. Indeed, his right eye was twitching more than ever, making it hard to see properly in the darkness he was now plunged into. He was thus forced to keep his right eye closed, in order to see properly.

You have to do this.

His night vision in his left eye was perfectly fine, at least. He could see, as he turned a corner, several large sets of cargo double doors, all of them open, their purple borders glowing bright purple. And his hearing hadn't suffered further, at least not yet; he could hear the tell-tale creaking of the pipes within the walls. It was more rattling than in the above decks; no doubt beyond them was nothing but space. He could see no obvious hidden panels or telltale signs of alcoves.

He did hear voices, though.

"...ow?"

He froze as he heard the low, tell-tale growl of Bok. It brought him back, suddenly, to the deck of that derelict ship by Suntala. For a second, he actually thought he was back there. Then his eyes caught his clawed hand, and he remembered that wasn't the case.

He might as well been, the way the situation was unfolding again. In the dark of a junk ship, on his way to the cargo? Check.

"…n here. He got in through the navigator access door and their ducts. Now he's hiding. I can smell him."

"Sir," Jabon's whisper shook as the conversation continued. Slowly, Keith leaned back, behind the corner, making himself as small as possible. "I'm getting no response from our transports. Our ship's comms are also non-responsive. The Lions are here and Fleet is being —"

"I don't need *you* to tell me what I *already know*!" The anger of Bok was quite terrifying to contemplate, even from just listening to his

voice hiss, even though Keith knew he'd still stand up to him anyways. "We're going to use the escape pod to get out of here the minute I subdue the Champion. You keep trying to re-establish contact with whoever's able to respond, and you order them to *blow* this *skeef*ing ship up the *dakika* we jet off!"

"Yes, sir." Jabon's response was little more than a squeak. "Be careful! The Champion is armed."

"Heh." The sound of Bok's voice became distant. "One-armed, at best. He might be able to pick off the runts, but he will *not* best *me*."

Then, there was the sound of footsteps. They weren't the heavy footsteps of Bok; they had to be the shuffling steps of his aide-de-camp. They started to come closer to Keith's position.

"Helvicta, come in." His voice was barely even a whisper. It was so quiet that, at first, Keith wasn't sure if what he was hearing was even real. "Helvicta, come in…oh dear…Helvicta…Fleet, someone, come in, this is Jabon…!"

Keith let out a slow, shaky breath as Jabon came ever closer. He couldn't let Jabon get in contact with the Helvicta fleet. He wasn't going to let the privateers destroy the *İrem*. Not while he could stop it.

Quietly as he could, he leaned Shiro's arm against the wall, de-activated his bayard, and waited.

"Helvi—" There was garbled sounds that cut through the static. "Oh, finally, I found an unblocked frequency. Katliam, is that you? Katliam, thi—"

Keith leaped into action. He grabbed Jabon, wrapping his arms tightly around what he hoped was his adversary's neck. Instantly, the four arms of the creature were grabbing at Keith, slapping and scratching him desperately as Keith tightened his grip. The communicator he had held clattered to the floor.

"Hunh…" Jabon's eyes widened as he realized that Keith wasn't letting go. "HNNGH!!"

"**Jabon**?" The comm finally crackled to life. "**Jabon, this is Katliam, we are currently clear of Lions, the fleet is compromised, please sta—**"

The transmission was instantly cut off once Keith's heel slammed

down onto the radio, snapping it cleanly in half with nary an electrical spark. The creature's struggles became more violent; several slashes hit Keith's face.

"Ny*nyo*—"

Whatever the first mate had to say, Keith wasn't interested. He may have been a weakened, half-starving, half-bred Galra, but in the end he still clearly stronger than his foe could have possibly dreamed of being. A single, hard wrench, a twist of his head from its position on its neck, and Keith heard a tell-tale crack coming from what went for this alien lifeform's spine. Jabon's arms immediately fell limp, and Keith dropped him gently to the floor as his final spasms of life came and went, eyes staring up at the ceiling.

...ah...

No time to let it sink in, what he just did. He had to hurry. If what Bok said was true, Shiro was somehow here as well. First, he knew he needed to make sure the escape pod was sealed off from Bok. If the Helvicta commander got off the ship with Shiro, it would only be a matter of time before everyone on the *İrem* would be nothing more but space dust.

Cargo Hold 7. Cargo Hold 7.

He at least had an idea, by now, of what the Galra numbers looked like. The numeral glyph for the Galra's equivalent of '7' was more like a lightning bolt than a digit, but when he spotted the bolt above one of the cargo doors, he wasted no time.

Grabbing up the arm and his bayard, he began to bolt towards it.

"*Jabon*!" He nearly skidded to a halt as he heard Bok's growling, coming from one of the doorways. "Don't run. You'll scare the prey when he *hears* you, you *skeef*ing idiot."

Keith didn't respond. He simply slowed his pace until the sound of his footsteps were negligible. He was almost there. Bok didn't know it was him. Bok didn't even know he was down here. And Shiro…he'd figure it out. He'd realize who was a friend and who wasn't. He always did, somehow, in the end.

Right?

Finally, he slid into Cargo Hold 7. Once he was behind the wall, he

brought his hand up to close the doors. Responding to his hand, the operating panel flashed red, then turned off.

Quiznak…!

No way to close the doors. It seemed the genetic verification Admiral Otac installed for getting into this place applied to the doors of these Cargo Holds as well. He turned around and looked at the Cargo Hold interior, to see what his options were for holding his enemy off.

The hold was tiny, surprisingly so. Despite this, there were plenty of crates in the hold, piled around in a maze-like path, though he had no idea what they were comprised of. They didn't look like the Heretic crates he'd once loaded, or the ones that were in the main Cargo Bay. He frowned; did they have anything in them? Or were they decoys? They certainly looked big and heavy. But if only three people could properly access this part of the shi—

Focus.

He was distracting himself.

Patience…patience brings focus.

He quickly shook his head, realizing that what he was looking for was right in front of him, albeit at the end of the maze. Still, he could see it, and when he climbed on a crate, he could see it in full. It was incredibly large – then again, Admiral Otac *was* a big Galra - its top reaching the ceiling, and its glass dimly reflecting in the low purple lights of the room. It was fastened to a pedestal, and the pedestal sat on top of an even larger circular panel on the floor.

No doubt, it was the airlock for the escape pod to get off the ship. It couldn't be anything else.

Ok. Let's do this. Keith went over the steps as he weaved his way through the maze. *Secure the pod. Find Shiro. Stop Bok. Get off the ship. Focus. I can do this.*

He walked out of the maze of crates, and his heart began to pound as he opened his right eye again.

Yes. I…I can do this. I—

He was within meters of the pod, just in time to hear the shot to ring out from the barrel of a Heretic.

Keith let out a terrible, animalistic screech as the heat of the laser blast struck him in the leg, just above the kneecap, coming right out of the other end of his thigh. He was lucky, he knew, that he wasn't struck directly in the shin. He'd built who knew how many Heretics on the ship; he'd seen what they could do to flesh at close range. He knew their power. He'd have no lower leg to fall on otherwise.

It was tempting, then, to lash out in the haze of the hot searing pain between his head, his eyes, and now the gaping hole his left leg was now sporting. It would have been easy, even with one leg working, to turn the tables on his assailant who dared to block his access to the pod. He didn't. He couldn't. *Wouldn't.* Not here, not now.

Not when he realized who his shooter actually *was*.

"You Galra…really are something." Shiro stepped forward from the shadows of the crate he was hiding behind, his foot landing on the metal arm that had unceremoniously flown out of Keith's arms when he was hit. "You...you *animals*...you *monsters* think you can keep *capturing* me? Keep me *imprisoned*? Make me your *puppet again*!?"

Keith's eyes flitted down to the arm and his breath caught in his throat. There was a terrifying feeling in the pit of his stomach forming as the precious moments ticked by. Shiro's foot couldn't crush it. It wouldn't make a dent and Keith knew it. Keith was aware that Shiro also knew it. But the way the heel of that foot ground angrily, futilely, down on the metal, could barely begin to describe Shiro's rage. That Keith knew as well.

"Well…*NO*…***MORE***!!"

That pit in Keith's stomach was getting so much deeper as the moments passed. The arm was kicked away, clattering into the wall next to the half-Galra with a clang. Keith didn't look up; it was all he could do to keep from shaking too much. Whether it was from pain, from fear of what else Shiro was going to do, it didn't matter.

This moment staring right at his face was practically everything Keith had feared would happen, deep down. Shiro, about to kill him, looking at a Galra-turned Keith as an enemy. *His* enemy. And why wouldn't he, after what the Galra did to him? Why wouldn't he, waking up on a ship full of Galra, regardless of how he got there?

His eyes trailed back to the ground. He couldn't stop it, though. This wasn't just his fear. This was his whole reality, now, wasn't it?

“Oh, what’s wrong? Can’t look at me? You’re *scared* of me, huh?” Said pain was enhanced with immobility as Shiro holstered his gun, and proceeded to roughly drag his target up off the floor by the scruff of his neck. “You…haven’t even *begun* to be scared! You don't *even*...you don't even *know* the meaning of fear!!"

Why would Shiro *ever* see a friend’s face among this crowd? Especially since – as he realized his feet were still on the ground – that he was actually *taller* than Shiro in this form. By an inch at least. There had been no way to actually measure his height now, compared to his original height until, ironically, at this moment. Unfortunately, realizing this made things hurt worse in Keith’s mind in the face of all that was in front of him.

It was true. He really did look nothing like the Keith Kogane that Shiro knew. The one who had never stopped believing Shiro was alive. The one Shiro had tasked to lead in his stead. The one who had considered Shiro like a *brother*.

No – this Keith Kogane was just another Galra to him.

“I should kill you. Right now, I should do it. *Your weapon* is going to kill you, how do you *like* that!?” The hold on his scruff shook. “None of you…*none of you*…even…have begun…to know what *I* can do!!”

He may have been turning back into a human, *apparently*, but Keith didn’t need any physical enhancements, Galra or otherwise, to start hearing - and realizing - the utter terror beneath the rage in Shiro’s words. This wasn’t someone who was in control of himself, much less the situation he was in. He was practically babbling, *screaming* to an injured foe who wasn't fighting back, losing precious time as the one responsible for his incarceration was stalking the halls right behind them. He could have already escaped in the pod. He could have already been picked up by one of the Lions and been halfway across the galaxy.

But he wasn't.

"Ghk..."

The other's unfocused eyes bore into him. Keith swallowed, trying to find any words that could possibly calm the older man down. Get him to see what was right in front of him. There might not have been any hope left for that. But he knew he had to try.

Because Keith knew he was going to die, and Shiro was going to be

caught if he didn't do something. *Fast.*

“You…” he rasped. “You need to get out of here. *Please.*”

“Oh, *now* you want me off the ship? What’s your game with that?” Keith's eyes shifted up just enough that he could see Shiro angrily grit his teeth. “Whatever happened to *victory or death*, huh? Or are you just going to beg for your life like the *coward* you are!?”

“No. No, your team…” *Deep breaths, Keith. Try to breathe. You need to do this no matter what.* He gurgled. “They’re here to rescue you, and you’re in no condition to fight anyone, much less me.”

“*Pretty* sure I’m doing a good job fighting *you* right now.” The hold on his scruff tightened as Shiro's frenzied expression deepened, his face dark with barely-contained contempt. “How did they get here? How did you even know how to contact them? What kind of *trap* are you laying for them? I’m guessing I’m the *bait*, huh?”

“…No. I..." A gulp. "I called them here to save us.”

Finally, Keith looked up at Shiro. He set his mouth to a determined line, hoping that, even though Shiro clearly didn’t recognize him, clearly was going to kill him, the sincerity of his words would at least get through to him.

"Its...its...the truth."

If he can get Shiro to go, that would be enough, no matter what doing this would mean to his getting back to the team. There wasn't enough time for him to explain and he knew it. No way to convince Shiro to let him come along. He could feel, even as he spoke, his own final chance of returning to Voltron slowly closing on him like a door.

There was enough time for Shiro to escape, though. He could go back to the Castle - had to, alone. Once they had Shiro, they’d naturally ask him if he saw Keith, and he’d say no. And then they’d be on their way, leaving Keith here, to devolve back into a human, only to most likely be forced through Processing, however that would end up without the pirates. There would truly be no escape after this, when his fate once more, permanently, ensconced in the hands of everyone on the *İrem*.

Oğul and Sarışın would be saddened, of course, that he’d failed. Then, Bilgin would probably just outright kill him soon after that. That was fine. He could and would take his chances, if he had to. Even if that meant forcing him to permanently be like the Galra, after all. For

however long that would end up being.

He would do what he had to do for Shiro's sake. For Voltron's sake. For the *İrem*'s sake - for *everyone's* sake.

"Wh-" Suddenly, Shiro's eyes widened, along with his mouth. "What… is going on with-?!"

"…Get out of here."

His words must have finally registered. Maybe his actions, also, or lack of actions, against Shiro. Maybe, too, the full gravity of the situation Shiro was in. Which was good, because his left temple had started flaring up again, and fiercer than before, alongside all the pain and exhaustion Keith felt catching up to him.

"G-go," he gasped, hand going to his neck, and to where the other's hand still grasped at him. Shiro didn't respond, simply staring back with his wide eyes. "Get...get back to your team before you're captured again. *Now.*"

Still Shiro didn't move.

"Don't...didn't you hear me? *Go*! You don't ha...have time *left*...to mess with me—"

"***FOUND YOU!***"

Bok's words merrily echoed through the cargo deck as Shiro instantly dropped his captive right on his tail (how Keith's tail hadn't just snapped in half by this point, he couldn't guess). He turned to shoot, taking out the Heretic he'd swiped, only to have the weapon in his hand shot out with worrying ease.

"Oh, I don't think so." The barrel of Bok's laser shot again, this time at Shiro's wrist, when he lunged for his weapon. It whizzed over the Paladin's hand, leaving a wide, nasty gash. "You're *mine*, Champion, and I intend to keep it that way this time!"

NO! Keith bit his tongue as he tried to keep the yowl from leaving his mouth. *Shoot, shoot, shoot* shoot-

His eyes darted to his right as Bok pushed a clearly-pained Shiro in the chest, and onto the floor with the toe of his boots.

"Now, once I've got you secure again?" The massive Galra glared

down at his prey, eyes glowing. “I’m gonna blow the ship up, and get the *skeef* that called your buddies here, right before I—“

Scream. And he was screaming, courtesy of the bright purple shot to the side of his face.

“Why…” The impacted part of his face seemed to be sliding down in a half-melted line of bright purple goop as he turned to the side. “*You*…!”

Keith didn’t respond, save to pull the jury-rigged trigger inside Shiro’s Galra arm again. Another blast, this time to the entirety of his face. His screams turned into garbled wails of agony as Keith took out his bayard.

“Save your breath, *Bok*.”

His blade found its way thrust to the pirate commander’s gut, nice and deep. Keith grit his teeth as he kept himself balanced on his good leg, letting Bok slide off his sword before putting it into compact mode.

What was left of Bok’s face stared back at him as he flopped to the floor, lifeless. One problem taken care of. There was still one more.

“…Go.” Keith’s footing began to wobble, and his breath began to labor, as he looked back at Shiro. “*Now*! Get out of—“

“*You*.”

Shiro didn’t move, and he hardly looked relieved. Indeed, he looked more upset as the seconds ticked by, and he struggled to his own feet, sliding to the wall as leverage. Keith’s own legs were refusing to cooperate with him anymore, and he could feel himself start to tip sideways towards a small pool of blood.

His blood.

Was he still bleeding from the shot?

“You’re…” Much to Keith’s annoyance (and not a little worry), Shiro stumbled towards him, choking out the words. “Oh my *god*.”

A hand shot out, grabbing his face before Keith could fall over. Keith felt a growl in his throat as Shiro lifted his chin up, staring into his face. Right into his eyes. Keith’s left eye began to twitch again; Shiro simply let go of Keith’s chin and gently lifted the upper lid of the

seizing eye instead.

“Your eye.” Shiro looked at it in horror. “It…was glowing, and then it started…dimming…and a pupil…it just grew in. A human…pupil.”

Keith’s breath hitched at those last three words.

“It’s a *human* eye—“ Shiro’s own breath quickened. Almost hyperventilating as horror and realization rolled off of him. “Keith. *This is Keith’s eye*. Why is…*oh god*—!”

So, it wasn’t Keith’s attempts at diplomacy, or the obvious similarities to the voice, or his blatantly obvious use of the bayard. His left eye had decided to just change back at that moment.

It figured.

But it did the job, nevertheless.

“Hey.” Keith weakly laid a hand on the other’s shoulder; an involuntary, violent shudder came from the other Paladin at the touch. “Calm down. Its ok. *You’re* ok. Breathe.”

“I-I…Keith.” Spoken as if Shiro was trying to make sure he was speaking to the right half-Galra. That, or he was trying not to pass out from his own quickening breath and shock surrounding the situation around him. “*Keith*. Do you *know* who I—“

“*Yes*.” It came out a bit sharp, and slightly moaned. That twitching-and-apparently-now-human eye might have rolled a bit, too. “Of course I remember who you are. How could I not? Bilgin didn’t punch my head *that* hard.”

“…Who?”

“It’s...a long story.” Keith shook his head out of Shiro’s grip. “But that doesn’t matter. None of it does. You need to leave.”

“No, I’m…not leaving without you, Keith.” Shiro looked down at the floor, hand to his head. “This is all my…I *shot* you, you need medical attention! This is…all my *fault*…!”

“I'll...I'll be fine. You’re in way more danger than I am right now.” Keith held up Shiro’s Galra arm, in offering. Shiro blanched at the sight. “Unlike you, I can pass as a Galra, for now. I can just put an eyepatch on to hide this eye.”

“And what about other body parts?” Shiro shook his head, still looking down at the floor. “No, there’s...there's no way. It’s too risky.”

“If I keep reverting to my human appearance…then...” Keith paused. He'd already made his decision, and yet he again thought of what Oğul told him, how he was dragged to a bathing vat by the Kommissar once his reverting state was found as a young child. He wondered how much it would hurt this second time. Maybe it wouldn't be as bad, save for his eye and head. “Then I’ll have to cross that bridge when I get to it, wherever that bridge leads to.”

“*Keith*…!”

“Just…*please*."

His tone became pleading, at this. Of course, Keith didn’t *want* to become a Galra permanently. But he knew if he had to, he could. And right now, he was certain he had to.

"*Listen* to...listen to me, ok?"

He’d survived being a Galra this long. He’d survived the Kommissar. He’d met Galra who’d gone through worse, who’d seen worse, and who, at that moment, were also going through one of the worst ordeals in their lives, partly because of him. And if they could survive the rest of their lives as Galra, he could, too. Even Bilgin killing him wasn't so bad - the worst that could happen was that he'd be dead.

If he had to forego his humanity and life for the sake of his leader – for the sake of *all* of his *friends* – he had already made peace with it. Really. He wasn’t so scared of it anymore. Right then, he’d do it in a heartbeat. And rhonestly, he was almost tempted to just find a vat of the blue quintessence and dump it on himself right then and there if it meant Shiro would *finally* take the hint and get the *quiznak* off the ship and back to safety.

“Shiro. You need...you need to get in, and get out of here. Get back to leading Voltron. Find...find a new Paladin who can fly the Red Lion. Tell her...I'm sorry. And…and let the team know I’ll be fine, ok?” Still even then Shiro hesitated, clearly shocked and crestfallen, his hand shaking. “*Shiro*?! Come on! You have to *go now*—!”

“That won’t be possible, I’m afraid.”

Keith’s ears immediately jerked up, and both he and Shiro looked to find Admiral Otac near the pod, Heretic drawn. Shiro's own hand

faltered when he saw the sight.

"Admiral Otac."

A glowing yellow eye stared at Keith as he spoke, then at Shiro, and finally at the leaking body of Bok. He stepped forward, letting out a grunt as he casually stepped over it. Keith was certain his heart was beating so loud that the old man could hear it from across the room.

He hadn't heard the admiral come into the hold at all. Maybe he'd been there the whole time, but Keith would never know for certain.

"This escape pod cannot be opened," The admiral's free hand pressed onto the pod's operating panel. "Without a affirmed scan of my own biometric readings. You would have certainly found your attempts to open this frustrated."

"Are…" Keith couldn't believe his eyes or ears. "You leaving your ship? After everything, and your *son* is—"

"No." Still pointing the gun, Otac stepped back. "You are leaving. Both of you."

Keith's eyes widened as he stared at the full-blooded Galra, dumbfounded. He could see out of the corner of his eyes that Shiro was just as stunned.

"…Hm?" The admiral tilted his head towards the pod. "Yes? Was my impression that you intended to leave the *İrem* to rejoin your own Voltron crew unfounded, then?"

"…N-no, sir." Shiro's shaking arm quickly wrapped around Keith's sagging body and pulled him up. "It wasn't. We're leaving."

"Then I would suggest you hurry. It appears most of the Helvicta fleet won't be a problem for you anymore." Slowly, the Galra's gun went down. "Nor will their leader, it seems."

Keith looked over at the body as Otac did. He could see the small streams of green, along with the glowing purple ooze of the shots Keith had sent at him. Most of the blood, however, was blue, trickling finally from the wound before it began to congeal on the ground. He looked back up at Otac, his eyes slightly furrowed in thought. Or at least as much thought as he could muster, given how he could feel his adrenaline going down further.

The admiral and the pirate certainly went back, that was for certain. After what Oğul had said, after hearing the pirate's own words, it wasn't as much of a surprise to see the blue blood as he thought it would be.

"Will we both fit?"

"The pod was always intended for two applicants." Otac slowly closed his eyes at the question. "At your size, you two should have no problem."

That, apparently, was all Shiro needed to hear, as the next thing Keith realized, he was being dragged into the pod, Shiro pulling him in with a hug from his arm. Keith remembered he had Shiro's other arm from his assault on Bok, and moved to wrap his own arms around it.

The older made no move to stop him, as he pulled Keith into the escape pod. He snuggled himself against Shiro's torso, as Shiro's arm wrapped around him, as if Keith pinning the Black Paladin into place against the glass would ensure he wouldn't abruptly disappear on him again.

"One more thing, Paladin." The glass had already been slid over them, and blue liquid had begun to fill the pod, as Otac spoke again. "I have reason to doubt that indications of your presence, or of your influence in this unfortunate episode, will last in any of the ship's official records for much longer. However, I believe you at least owe me the dignity of something to remember you by when nothing else of you remains. Well, not me, but rather those who will live on this ship."

"...I do?"

"Indeed." Otac's eye watched him as he responded. "When one leaves the *İrem*...however it may happen...the others make it a custom to call the departed by their real name, among one another, when they speak of them."

Keith blinked at the admiral, surprised. Then he recalled the artist's secret room, and what Yazar and Hemsire had been referred to as. The code Oğul had used to open the secret hallway to the very pod he was now in. The names, for the most part, were not the same kind of name as the one they had been given on the ship.

He swallowed hard as the liquid filled up to his chest.

"...Keith Kogane." There was a slight shift in Shiro's hold – a little

tighter – but Keith ignored it. “My real name is Keith Kogane.”

“Keith Kogane.” The admiral’s voice became muffled by the filling liquid as it repeated the words. “*Vrepit sa*, and…may you and I need never fight one another on the field of battle.”

There was a beep, and again the feeling of being pushed, like months prior, as the escape pod ejected out of the *İrem*; it was much slower than the pirates’ escape pods had been. It was more like a gentle nudge, than anything else. There was black, and then, there was space. *Outer* space.

The pod offered a full view of what was happening. All around the two Paladins as they floated inside the pod was silent carnage; three dozen corsair ships, most of them badly damaged or in pieces, floating aimlessly around the field of battle. There was junk and metal everywhere from broken ships, pieces that looked like they belonged solely to Galra-made fighters. The *İrem* itself had sustained a good deal of damage, though not nearly as much as what could only be Bok’s main ship. It was a junk ship larger even than the Suntala ship, and it was now a massive mess ready to snap in two with the slightest tap of the hull.

Below them was the planet Helvicta XVI, glowing green. Somewhere to the left - beyond Keith’s line of sight - was no doubt a piece of the İlçeler asteroid belt between the named and unnamed planets of the system. And in to his left, right on the border of his sight, Keith could see the haloed outline of the Castle of Lions within the silhouette of the system's blue sun.

“They’ll spot us.” Relief washed over him, and he quietly settled his head on Shiro’s chest, closing his eyes. “I’m sure…yeah…they will.”

“Keith?” The worry crept back into Shiro’s voice. “Stay awake, ok?”

“I’m…fine."

Keith could feel his energy start to drop ever more drastically. Everything in the past…day? Two days? What did he know now about time anymore?...was on him now. The lack of sleep, the beat down by the other half-Galras and the pirates. The wounds Shiro and others had inflicted on him when the Helvicta had attacked. The bleeding. The headache he now knew was a sign of heavier changes to come. His adrenaline finally petering out. He couldn’t fight it further.

If he died right then and there, he wouldn’t have cared. He’d

accomplished his mission and that was what mattered.

“I’ll…I’ll be fine.” His ear twitched. “I promise...”

“Keith.” Shiro started to sound further away with each passing second. “*Keith*! Open your eyes! Keep your focus…!”

“I…”

Keith’s eyes fluttered open to the increasingly faint shouting. There was the darkness of space beyond the liquid. Then, grey filled his vision. Then, yellow. Blue.

“*KEITH! **KEITH***!”

Then everything went completely black.

Küçülen

He might have woken up at some point. There was a lot of blurry colors in the dark – blue, then white, then a dark brown blob, in large blurry circles. Then there was bright light, and shadows hovering over him. It was like waking up on the *İrem* all over again. Maybe he'd never left.

The far-away voices, however, didn't sound like any of the half-Galra he knew.

…inj…ed, an……hot…

…my go…!

…hat re….ith!?

"I'm." He tried to speak. "I'm fine. I'm fine. The human…Shiro…he… mmn…"

It was just too much, and as he felt himself float off the ground, he let himself sink back into the darkness.

He was in a healing pod when he woke up again, for good, and became aware that he was indeed in the Castle of Lions, as he heard the noises of the machine's deactivation ring around him. There was no other explanation, right? He certainly recognized the room the pod was in as his eyes slowly opened to half-lid, even as the atmosphere within stung them.

Otherwise, he was hallucinating that he was safe in a desperate attempt to keep his last vestiges of sanity. Or dying in Shiro's arms. Or dying elsewhere. Maybe he was back in the Med Bay with Teori poking at him, or in a vat full of blue quintessence because Otac decreed it for him. Maybe he was just one step from being killed. Or already dead. The Helvicta Corsairs would probably not have suffered him to live. Not after what he did to their commander. Or Bilgin, after what happened with his sister.

His eyes quietly came into something resembling focus, staring at the

reflection in the glass. Two very dilated – and very human pupils - stared back at him from beneath the Galra fur on his face. He lazily shut his eyes again, opening them again and braving the sting again, to make sure he wasn't seeing things. Then he blinked again. Both of his eyes were back to normal. He wasn't seeing things.

And, he wasn't *seeing* things. He knew his eyesight had gone back to human levels. He could tell – the blue colors of the tank weren't as vibrant, and he probably couldn't see as well in the darkness if he tried, like before. His hearing had to also be back down to human levels by now, too, right?

However long 'by now' meant. How long *had* he been in the pod?

"—wake!!"

Oh, that was Hunk. His hearing was still good enough to make it out even behind the glass. God, he'd missed Hunk's voice. He'd missed *everyone*'s voice. He was really there, wasn't he? He was really on the Castle of Lions.

He was really *home*.

The tank suddenly deactivated, healing liquid and atmosphere subsiding with a puff of hissing smoke, and Keith found himself staggering out, about to fall right on his face.

"Gotcha!" Hunk caught him, before naturally pulling him into a bear hug. A small sniff escaped him. "Man, Keith, I'm glad you're ok! We all are! You wouldn't *believe* what we had to do to find you and-!"

"Hnnrgh!" Keith gasped for air. "*Air*!!"

"…Oh right, half-Galra still need air too. Fine!"

Hunk rolled his eyes with a snort as he freed the other from his hug, but he was still grinning nevertheless as he looked up at Keith, gently taking his hand and guiding him to the couch. Keith, for his part, swayed unsteadily as he looked down at Hunk, still finding it surreal that he was practically towering over the other. And Hunk, like Shiro, wasn't exactly a tiny guy.

"Seriously, though, *geez* you got taller. Also…hope you don't mind me asking…" Hunk leaned back in. "Can I pet your ears? I'll be gentle and I won't tell anyone!"

“No.” Keith’s ears flatted against his head – and upon doing so, he realized they were significantly smaller than before. “I’m not a cat, despite what Lance’ll probably claim.”

“Are you sure?” Hunk scratched his cheek, his side-eyeing with a conspiratorial gleam. “I mean, you do kind of fit the profile right now. Got the fur, got the ears, got the bone spur claws, got the tail, got the slightly standoffish attitude! You even have the toe beans on your feet!”

“…You realize the ‘toe beans’ are sweat glands on a cat, right?”

“…Really?” Hunk blinked. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Keith rubbed his head, then his cheek. There was throbbing pain just beneath the surface, around where his gums were. “I won’t have them for too much longer, if what I was told was right. So you don’t have to worry about my stinky feet.”

“Aw…”

There was a silence, as Hunk looked at Keith, eyes large and pleading, his lips puffed out *just* a little. Keith let out a grunt; he knew that look. It wasn’t going to go away.

Unless.

“…Fine.” He signed in resignation. “Go crazy.”

“Eeeeeeee! Eeeheheheheheh…” And there Hunk went, gently petting his ears and head, the awe in his expression much like that of a three year old petting his first animal. “Woah…so soft…”

“Yeah, yeah,” Keith mumbled, even as he felt his eyes close from the massage. That was what it felt like Hunk was doing, at least. It was surprisingly relaxing, and if he wasn’t careful he was going to fall asleep. “Enjoy it while you can, Hunk.”

“…Ok, on that note, in all seriousness I was wondering. Is this normal for Galra or half-Galra or…whatever?” Stopping the (admittedly very comfortable) petting, Hunk pointed towards Keith’s face. “You healed *way* faster than we thought you would, and…one of your eyes was definitely glowing when we got you in here.”

“Its…complicated.” Keith bit his lip. Well, his Galra teeth were still there for the moment. “But this…the eyes actually aren’t normal for

someone like me. Like I said, this..." as he lazily motioned to himself, "isn't going to be a thing for too long now."

"So you're not just…becoming a Galra forever?" Hunk held a hand up. "I mean, that would've been kind of abrupt, but I'm pretty sure we could figure out how to handle that if that ends up happening. Like what you would eat and how to treat certain wounds and—"

Keith had the feeling that Hunk, Pidge and Coran (and..well, ok, he knew Lance would have probably been there too, even if he probably didn't understand half of the terminology they used) had already gone through those contingencies while he'd been recovering, and a ghost of a smile formed on his face. He gave Hunk's shoulder a squeeze, as he thought of it.

"…I could have." Hunk let out a slight squawk at the response. "It was looking like I might have to for a little bit. But…I don't think you guys have to worry about that now. Like I said, its complicated."

Keith spotted the other pods out of the corner of his eye. They were all empty.

"I'll…tell you guys later, but I was wondering abou—"

"'Complicated'? Complicated is my middle name!"

That was definitely *not* Hunk's voice responding. Keith and Hunk both instantly turned to the right, their eyes wide.

"So…" Glasses gleamed in the darkness as Pidge cracked their knuckles. "The Blue. Are you ready to talk about it? Or do I have to beat the truth out of you with *science*, my new half-Galra subject?! *Mweheheh…*"

Both Hunk and Keith silently screamed.

So being in Pidge's presence wasn't as terrible as Keith thought it would be. She apparently just wanted to complete whatever information she already had gleaned from him during his time in the pod. What that meant wasn't clear, but at least she wasn't bringing a drill to his skull.

Though, Lance being in tow now was a minus, as he had an odd smirk on his face. As if Lance knew something that Keith didn't.

"So…you want space broccoli? You must be hungry."

"What?"

"…Oh, right." Lance nodded to himself, clearly pleased at Keith's confusion. "Cats don't eat broccoli. They probably don't like the smell of it either. *Oops!* Good thing I brought this space goo for backup."

He had no idea what Lance was referring to with the broccoli and he wasn't sure he wanted to know. At least Keith knew the cat jokes were coming, as he changed into a shirt and shorts borrowed from Hunk before diving into his food. They were big on him, but then again, none of his own clothing could fit him with his current Galra build.

"So, it's definitely temporary?"

"Yeah." Keith pointed to his eyes as he shoveled another scoop of goo into his maw. Quiznak he was but *hungry*. He knew he'd been starved, but who would have thought goo would taste so amazing, even so? "I was told by Oğul…er, one of the half-Galra that I was with…that I wasn't exposed enough to the…electruni…muh…uh." Oh, *crud*, what was the name of the stuff? Weird name, sounded like e, rhymed with — "Well, I forget what exactly it's called, its got a weird name, but the blue-tinted quintessence I found on the ship was irradiated with the stuff. It's what was used to alter the genetics of the half-Galra on the ship to make them Galra."

"Keeeeeith, how could you forget?! That kind of information's *important*!" Pidge huffed. "I've been trying to figure out exactly what that stuff is since *forever* and the Castle doesn't have anything on it! If I don't know what exactly you were exposed to in that quintessence, how am we supposed to know how to identify it and treat it the next time we come across any of it!?"

"I have a question!" Lance quietly brought his face towards Keith. "Did the quintessence taste like tuna?"

Keith's face set into a deep frown. Yup, just as expected.

"Bpffff!" Lance bit his lower lip. "Sorry, but *man* you should see your face! You are such a *grumpy* cat. Grump space cat. A *Galra*-mpy cat! Heheh."

“Still can’t believe,” Another inhaling of a mountain of green, “that *you* were leader while I was gone.”

“What can I say?” Lance shrugged, bringing a hand to his chin as he did. “I was pretty awesome, and totally kicked pirate butt with nary a hair out of place. Or hairballs in my throat, eheheh. Also, ah, you should probably slow down before you start throwing up your food.”

“Yeah, go on, yuk it up while you can.”

“…I’m actually being serious about the eating part. You shouldn’t eat so much food at once like you are, you’re gonna get sick.” The smirk slowly dissipated on Lance’s face. “You’ve lost, like, 50 pounds. Your body won’t tolerate it. Gradual reintroduction, its basic science, dude!”

“…*Oh.*”

Eating too much, too quickly. Keith found himself slowing down, taking smaller spoonfuls, despite his body suddenly begging for more. Were the rations he got from the Mess Hall really that small? They had seemed so filling even as he knew he was being kept half-starved. Or had that been Ağla making due with what she – what the Admiral, as well – were able to get from wherever they could get it, to make it seem more than what they were?

“Yeah.” Lance’s eyes darted back and forth for an awkward moment, before snapping his fingers. “Right. Cat. Eyes. To Pidge. Your catness being temporary?”

“…Yeah.” Keith wasn't going to admit out loud that he severely underestimated Lance's knowledge base and attentiveness. “The eyes and ears are what he said would revert back first. I have no idea how long it will take me, just that…it definitely felt like forever while I was changing.”

“So then the reversions will probably be slow as well. I can probably convince Coran to let me plunder some supplies from the med bay so it’s not...so bad?” Hunk turned to Pidge as she was looking at her console. “What’re you doing?”

“Figuring out a possible time frame of reversion based on the information I’ve gotten already. Ok…mm.” Pidge nodded as she tapped it all in her control panel. “Actually, if I account for what I was able to glean on the Helvicta method of timing day/night cycles… hmm.”

There was a frown on Pidge's face that Keith knew meant something was off. She just wasn't bothering to tell him yet.

"Let's see. Two months on that schedule is four Earth months on ours. And you've been gone for about 167 days, according to Earth reckoning, or 210 quintants if you talk to Coran. You were fully furry when you woke up there…you got the gunk on you too, before you were picked up. On the ship, right?"

"Wh…210 *quintants*?"

"So, we're probably looking at…" Click. "Well, ok, don't know if we can determine how long you took to originally change with just this information, but that's where I come in with what I want to do with you."

"Hold up. Wait a second—" Keith's eyes widened as he looked at all three Paladins, his mind calculating the numbers Pidge tossed at him in his head. "About 167—I was gone for over *five months*?"

There was a brief silence at this.

"Oh yeah," Hunk looked sheepishly away. "I, uh, might have forgotten to tell you that."

"T…that *might* have been important to tell me when I first woke up! Oh my *god*, five—!"

The disorientation he'd first felt, the tiredness, the Kommissar's words when he was first processed – now it all made sense why it had been so difficult to adjust at first. Why the hours and days had seemed so *long*. Because they *were*, for his human sensibilities. And now, facing the time difference, time having both passed and not passed, he felt disoriented again, and he brought a hand to his head. Like he'd been in a time warp, a bubble, and everything was inexplicably the same – and yet different.

So much could have happened. So much could have gone *wrong*. And he wasn't *there*.

"I didn't even realize…!" His eyes widened, his breath quickening. "Almost a half of a year…"

"Woah, dude, its ok." Lance held his hands up. "Your fur's puffing out, calm down. You're back here now, you can adjust again, and that's what matters."

"I *can't*…!" *Don't punch Lance. Don't punch Lance. This isn't his fault.* "*Please* tell me nothing major happened while I was gone."

"Actually, aside from looking for you and Shiro and learning more about those pirates and fighting them off, no." Pidge was still typing as Hunk responded. "Just like before, nothing indicating whether Zarkon's alive or dead. The Blade of Marmora, what's left of the ones who can contact us, still can't put their fingers on the pulse of what's happening within the Galra Empire's high command without a new mole. Just that Haggar's been on the move, and the Command Center's been completely barricaded and can't be breached. She's probably planning something, we just don't know what."

That part, at least, added up from the speculation Keith had seen and heard on the *İrem*. The lack of seeing Holy Zarkon. The pondering of whether the mystical figure even existed. He took a deep breath. Maybe Teori was right and Zarkon now really was a zombified puppet being commandeered by a hive of B'schiqi fleas now.

"We also helped some worlds on the way, especially in the sector of space we looked for you in," Pidge picked up a drink and took a sip, "but outside of that we haven't been able to do anything major, at least without knowing the full situation of the Galra Empire."

A pause in the typing.

"Still no indication of who exactly helped Matt and where he is. No sign of dad whatsoever."

The typing resumed.

"…And Allura? What's she think about…?" Wait. "What about *Shiro*? Is he all right?"

"Allura practically danced with all of us when we got your distress call." Hunk wiggled his hands up and down to demonstrate, his hips slightly shimmying to an unheard beat. "I mean, she probably also thought you had a sore throat until you got brought in, but…she seemed fine with how you looked, if…that's what you're asking. I think she was just relieved you were alive and could be healed."

"…And?" They weren't telling him something. "About Shiro?"

"He's…"

The pause that followed from Lance was nothing short of awkward.

Hunk looked away, and even from behind Keith could tell Pidge had become stone-faced. Keith's eyes narrowed.

"He's all right, last we knew?"

"What do you mean, 'last you knew'?"

"I mean. He wasn't hurt too bad, at least." Lance swallowed, almost stiffened. Was he anticipating a bad reaction from Keith? "But…he's not here if that's what you're asking. Allura took him on some kind of…super-secret diplomatic mission a few quintants ago; she wouldn't take no for an answer and wouldn't tell us what was happening. Shiro didn't even know what was going on."

"…Oh."

There had been a lot of things Keith had been hoping to tell Shiro when he'd woken up – namely that he wasn't mad about being shot in the leg – and he couldn't hide the disappointment in his voice. The worry. Why would Allura take Shiro away when he'd only just escaped the ship with Keith? Was Shiro doing all right? Especially after what happened, he couldn't understand what Allura was thinking, taking Shiro away again, taking him from friends who could help him re-acclimate, who could figure out how to help him with his arm, and—

Which reminded him.

"Where'd his arm go?"

"No…no clue." The awkward silences were getting worrisome. "Haven't seen it anywhere since after Shiro and you first came back on board."

Keith's ears folded back at this news. If it wasn't on board the Castle, then there was only one possibility – it was no longer on the ship.

Of course, Allura and Shiro would have taken the Galra arm, wrenched from the rest of Shiro's body, to parts unknown. It was already likely junked, and it was Shiro's choice to do that. It was a piece of himself that he disliked. He'd made it clear enough. Keith had no reason to believe that the anger – the fear – Shiro had shown before wasn't anything but the truth about how he felt about the darn thing.

"…Soooo!" The smirk coming back on Lance's face as he spoke

brought him out of his thoughts. “Can I pet your ears or *what*?”

The response was a half-hearted swipe of Keith’s claws at the smirky smirk.

“*Gah*! BAD CAT!!”

The jokes and the worries about Shiro aside – and everyone was worried, he could tell - Keith’s biggest focus was that they all knew the changes were going to happen. It was just a matter of time before his eyes wouldn’t be the only visible reminder that he was not going to be Galra for much longer. Pidge also knew this, so she insisted that every evening, from there on out, he give her a blood sample. Including that moment. Right that moment. She whipped the needle out like it was no big deal.

It was *only* slightly worrying how fast it took for her to do that.

She wanted to document the changes, get a more complete deep schematic on his insides - since they couldn’t actually sample his blood or anything in the pod due to his critical condition - estimate a timeline for his eventual reversion, and, with Hunk, try to identify what was put in the blue quintessence. See how it was affecting his body even as its effects lessened and the substance itself flushed out of his system, and whatever other science things that Pidge liked doing. She had been scouring every possible medical database she could find since he had returned, and downloaded it onto her systems, just to accomplish this.

It made some sense to Keith; if he was exposed again to the blue quintessence in the future, they could be properly prepared for what might happen to him. Not to mention, he hadn’t brought his special-present canister of organs with him, so he had no extra organs to have to him. When he mentioned this to Pidge, she complained that he lost vital samples, and would make The Worst Scientist Ever.

It only took the first sample to finally see, in full, within the quintessence in his blood. Pidge’s screens lit up with a bodily outline of Keith, with organs and blood vessels appearing everywhere. A chart instantly lit up, revealing Keith’s genes – and the component altering it.

Pidge's computer and database, much more up to date than the Castle med bay's had been, revealed the name of the element in the quintessence. One of the most localized elements in the universe, only having been discovered in the past several decades within the systems in the İlçeler Nebula, just as Oğul had relayed to him.

Elantinine.

At least Keith remembered the first letter right.

"Wow, uh." Pidge's eyes bugged out. "This stuff is radioactive. Crazy radioactive."

"*Geez*! Look at that reading!" Hunk leaned in, eyes also wide. "Is that number even real?! Oh my—it *is* real!"

"What? *What!?*" Keith stood on his tip-toes to try and look, without avail. "What's wrong!?"

"Keith, this stuff is, like, the most radioactive substance I've ever seen!" Pidge's fingers flew across the panel as Keith's body schematic from the healing pod came up and combined with her own. "It's like they took Polonium-210 and shoved steroids in it! *Super* steroids! Super-ultra-maxi-*extreme* steroids!! Enough that you've also apparently grown an extra liver, and a pancreas and a *thyroid* and—you have *three extra kidneys*!?"

"Look at all the scar tissue! Oh my god…" Hunk's eyes became large as saucers. "That's a lobe, isn't it? An extra lung lobe!?"

"***WHAT!?***" Lance was instantly pressing his face to the panel. "Holy—you've been turned into a mutant, Keith! You look like you have a whole bunch of grapes down there! No wonder you were all lumpy and your organs had elevated levels while you were healing!"

"Wait—" Keith blanched. "I knew about some of that other stuff, but I…have extra kidneys *too*?"

"You—this—it—" This left Pidge trapped in a stammering fit as she tried to contemplate what her comrade just said. It clearly wasn't working very well. "*How are you even* alive right now!?"

A pause.

"…Do you think," Hunk looked over at Keith worryingly. "We should wear hazmat suits around him?"

"*Hey!!*"

It turned out that, outside of a container and in normal oxygenated environments, elantinine's half-life and radioactivity was surprisingly short and stunted. So much so that it posed no true threat to humans or oxygen-breathing species with similar genes, short of someone directly injecting it into their bodies or something ridiculous like that. It was only in certain atmospheric conditions – namely ones that were more aligned with optimal Galra respiration benefits – where the radioactive potency became instantly evident. That included causing the suppression of non-Galra genetic code in favor of the Galra bits.

(This also resulted in extra Galra bits, including the mutant organs. Naturally, the team offered to get rid of what was left of them. Keith, naturally, declined after some thought. If what Teori said about problems with their original organs was true, having extras wouldn't be a bad idea for the future.)

"If this rate of cellular breakdown continues," Pidge observed as she continued crunching the data on her panel. "We're looking at an Earth month overall for reversion. At least, if my numbers are right. But *geez*, this stuff being in you at all is really kind of…"

It turned out that Oğul, Ağla and Sarışın were right about how important the radioactivity was in the process of genetic conversion, and the risk of what exposure could do. However, they neglected to mention that elantinine was not just incredibly dangerous to Galra – half- or whole-blooded – it was also dangerous to several dozen other species, and its potency was such that most average Galra wouldn't actually survive around it. Exposure to it could potentially kill within minutes if the person wasn't properly prepared; it otherwise increased the likelihood of deadly disease and mutation in those that survived, within a few decades at the most. Like, for example, the extra organs that Keith ended up with.

Or perhaps – more likely - they didn't really know just what the rate of lethality really could be, and just how many half-breeds like them might have died without ever setting eyes on the *İrem*. Most of them didn't talk about friends and family who'd Processed, and Teori certainly seemed to understand they were likely all living on borrowed time. All of them did. They must have all known enough to

not want to know more.

Maybe it was better they didn't know the full ramifications of their predicament, and to keep in their ignorance of the full depths of horror that a failed conversion could bring. Who knows how many others had died during Processing, and for what reason? In an attempt to fit in, to regain their family honor, to save someone else? Simply to pass as Galra, even if it meant a lifetime of servitude on a ship in the middle of nowhere? How did Otac feel when he decided that was his *only* recourse against Zarkon, for a son he personally made sure had room to get in in the escape pod, after seeing what it did to the Helvicta miners?

Keith would have clenched his fists in anger at the thought, as he lay in his bed several night cycles later, had his fingers not started to tingle. A tingling that turned into bone-splitting pain as time went by, as his spurs on his hands – and, soon enough, his feet – began to wither and turn black in the nail beds. It was late at night when it began. Within the hour, he was banging his shoulder onto the room to Lance's quarters, shouting.

If anyone on the ship had nail trimming supplies, it was him.

"Geez, kitty, What is it? I need my bea-" Lance stopped when he saw Keith's hands. "Oh. Oh my *quiznak*. Would you like me to, erm, cut out those claws for you?"

"That…" Keith grit his teeth. "Is not how you use *quiznak*, seriously."

"Look, whatever, just *get* in here." Lance grabbed Keith and dragged him into the room. "Um. If your claws are really like those of a cat this is…going to hurt. A bit. A million bits…"

Within a half hour, the other two Paladins and Coran were at Lance's door, brought there by the sounds of Keith's screaming. Keith heard the banging, but didn't care, and he even forced Lance to stay and finish. Blackened and rotted or not, this was his bone he was talking about. Breaking bones hurt. This was torture. Lance was soon enough forced to tie him up with towels to the toilet. Or, he did after his hands stopped shaking and the towels kept slipping from his hands.

"I'm sorry." It was all Lance could say through the entire, horrible procedure. "I'm sorry, seriously, I'm *sorry*, I'm *so sorry*—"

When a response finally happened to those frantically trying to break the door down – Pidge was two seconds away from hacking Lance's

door opened – Keith emerged, his fingers and feet wrapped in bloodied bandages as he pitifully shuffled. Blue was interspersed with small splotches of red on the bandages, the towels wrapping his wrists, his face, his arms, his clothing. In faint stains on the floor. On his belt was a baggy with blood and black stumps sealed within.

“I-I needed my nails trimmed,” he managed to say with a whimper as he pitifully tried to shuffle past them, trying to hand the baggie to Pidge. “Trust me, you…you d-didn’t want none of it.”

Behind him was a paler-than-normal Lance, shaking violently. Once Keith was in everyone else’s custody he proceeded to retreat to his bathroom, the sounds of retching echoing soon after.

A week’s worth of quintants passed. No sign of Shiro or Allura.

The skin on his fingers and toes had been growing over the remnants of the exposed bone spurs since the night he had them cut; now, nails were growing from the beds. Human nails. They were still quite stubby and uneven, and his digits were still in pain. Keith made sure to wrap his hands in bandages before going outside his room while his malformed tips unceremoniously bloomed.

Taking a deep breath, he proceeded to the kitchen. Hunk’s cooking was nothing like Ağla’s cooking - not that he could necessarily eat all of the foods a Galra could anymore at the levels he’d ingested them, and also, the breakfast soup recipe he’d stuffed into his suit was nowhere to be found when he woke up - but then again, there was no comparison anyway. Ağla may have known how to make the food for starving children taste glorious on the *İrem*, but what was in front of him right now - this was the closest he had to the food of home. Of Earth, of the Castle of Lions, of the Paladins. And this would be the first time that he might be able to eat Hunk’s rich food again without feeling sick from eating too much or wrong.

After five months of tiny rations, his stomach hadn’t exactly been able to welcome much of anything on the Castle of Lions outside of space goo. Every meal had so far resulted in the risk of him having to bring it back up in the bathroom later, forcing him to only take a few bites at most before feeling full and sick. Finally, his stomach felt calmed down enough that he felt confident enough to eat something of Hunk’s

without feeling queasy.

So, he took a nice big bite of his meal. And promptly crunched on a canine tooth, which was promptly spat out into the table for everyone to see.

“Oh…” Lance’s face withered at the fang, and he covered his face with his hands. “Eeeeeeeeeew!”

“Uh…” Hunk offered a napkin to wrap the tooth in. “You gonna be ok?”

“Mm.” Keith winced. “I’ll be fiaaa*ngh*-!?”

A second tooth popped out and stuck on Keith’s lower lip as he attempted to pronounce the f-sound. Everyone – save Lance, as his face was still covered - stared at the sight.

“…Er, maybe take two napkins?”

By the end of the evening, most of Keith’s teeth had fallen out, and Hunk was having Keith gently slurp his food through a straw. He’d even used the food he’d given everyone else, albeit making it pureed to the point of it being liquid.

“No offense, man, but this is seriously like watching *The Fly* in real life!” Lance shuddered. “Only if the transformation was from fly to human, and Jeff Goldblum had *way* less personality.”

This earned Lance a glare. Lance responded with a cheesy, sheepish, worried grin.

“At least we know his body is still flushing out that stuff, which is a very good thing for him.” Pidge was creeping towards Keith, ready to poke him with a needle for the nightly sample. “That, or he’s going to need dentures from here on out.”

This earned Pidge a glare. Pidge, in response, simply jabbed the needle into his upper arm.

“Yeah, so…” Hunk pat his compatriot’s shoulder once the blood sample was taken. “Is that better? Does it taste ok even though I had

to extra-puree it?"

This earned Hunk a glare – and a thumbs-up.

His teeth didn't grow back in for another two *gü*—days. What it did finally happened, though, the sensation of his teeth growing back, and the pain in his gums as things knocked around in his mandible, became almost secondary to his jaw hurting up to his eardrums. Between those two days, his face was swollen into a circle, and in such pain that he could barely speak. Thus, he could barely respond to Lance's quips and puns about his painfully-receding cat ears turning into Vulcan ears.

He knew Lance was trying to make him feel better. Help him get back in the groove of being on the ship with Lance being the annoying joker and Keith being the annoyed receiver of said jokes. He could appreciate the effort, but it was, for the moment, for naught. Not while he was in so much pain.

When he finally managed to say something in retort without ungodly amounts of pain, it was after giving Lance a good smack on the back of his head.

"Stop *cat*erwauling about me."

"…*Darnit*!" Lance gasped, holding the back of his head as Keith gave him a smug little smirk. "That's *such* a good pun and I didn't even think of it!! Now I can't even use it against you!!"

When he stared at himself in the mirror later that night, Keith could, on top of just how miserable and sick his face looked - swear his ear lobes were almost *squirming* to try and flatten themselves further on his head. That particularly unnerving thought didn't help with getting him to sleep, or with trying to get back onto a normal, Earth-like, 24-hour cycle.

Especially when, sometimes, when he slept, he could see Jabon staring back at him. Feel himself force his bayard into Bok's gut, hear the way the body *squelched* when he let it go. He wasn't guilty and he didn't regret doing it for Shiro's sake. But sometimes, it nevertheless scared him to see them in his dreams. He couldn't help but wonder if Jabon

or Bok had family they cared for. Family they'd lost. More reasons for hating Otac and the crew he'd harbored, for hating the Galra Empire and what they'd done. Crew and Galra like *him*.

There was still no word about Allura or Shiro.

Eventually, he found himself walking in the middle of the night, shuffling quietly through the halls and decks of the Castle of Lions. No, he couldn't see like he could as a Galra anymore – the halls were quite, quite dark outside of the emergency lights here and there - but it was still nice to see his color spectrum start to widen and be less gray again. His eyesight was also less blurry than before.

~Paladin.~ He heard his Lion purr quietly as he roamed. ***~Shall you spend time with me?~***

~…Yeah.~

After that, it was a good few hours in his open cockpit, staring at the controls. Everything looked so familiar, and yet so foreign, at the same time. After months of seeing Galra scripts and controls, his mind was being forced to readjust to what he had once known so intimately. Leaning back in his chair after some time, he looked up at the ceiling of his Lion's mouth, closing his eyes. It was good to feel Red's connection with him again, at least. She was still there for him and she didn't care what he looked like. She had decided he was her Paladin and that was that.

That, at least, didn't feel so foreign or forgotten.

"Ah, good evening, Number Four." Keith's pointy ears twitched, and his eyes opened, as he looked down from his cockpit. Coran, for his part, was waving to him. "I assume your…ah, what was the word… cicada rhythm is still unbalanced?"

"Circadian rhythm. And yeah." Keith leaned forward, crossing his arms on the main control panel of Red. "I…it sucks."

There was silence, at this.

"You seem uneasy." Coran clasped his hands behind his back. "Is it because you cannot sleep, or…?"

Keith closed his eyes again at the question, and sighed.

"…I…I still can't believe I was gone for so long. So much could have

happened, and…I wasn't here. After Shiro put me in charge, I just… disappeared. And then, when I had a way out, I…"

Keith trailed off at this, opening his eyes again and suddenly finding the insides of his forearms to be very intriguing and worth study.

"If I may be so bold to say," After a long silence, Coran spoke again. "It might help to talk to the others about what exactly happened to you during your absence. I know it *must* be a very difficult subject, being in the hands of an enemy ship—"

"They…" Keith bit his lips, his new teeth still shooting some pain into his mouth. "The crew of the *İrem* weren't enemies. Not like that, Coran."

"Oh!" Coran seemed pleasantly surprised. "So, then, they were like the Blade of Marmora, then? Rebels, perhaps?"

"…No." At Keith's mental urging, the Lion lowered her mouth to disembarkation level. "They weren't that, either. They were…they were just *people*, Coran. People like *me*."

With that, Keith hopped off out of his Lion with an *oof*. Instantly, Coran's hand was on his shoulder, steadying him.

"I keep thinking about it and I can't stop thinking about it. I'll probably never see them again." Keith looked down at the floor. "Pretty sure the Admiral's already shuffled whoever's left of the crew to parts unknown by now, far away from the İlçeler Nebula. Everyone else who doesn't know I escaped…they'll…they'll probably assume I *exploded*."

Thanks, Sarışın.

"And…knowing that… knowing what I know about them, and… Helvicta…"

"You miss them."

"…Maybe I could have saved them." Keith's voice became bitter. "They were outcasts and half-breeds with Galra blood in them. They were *my people*, Coran. People the likes of which I'll never find anywhere else because…because they're dead or *passing*."

Coran was quiet at this. Keith couldn't help but keep going, his hands balling into fists.

“I could have done better for them. I could have brought them all on board the Castle of Lions, found a world they could live on or just somewhere they could be without…without being *afraid*, or *resentful*, and—“

“I believe your fellow Paladins have a saying, yes?” Coran quietly pat Keith’s shoulder. “You’re only human. Or in your case, half-human. I think, if those who you miss on that ship care for you as much as you they, they will understand that you could only do so much. All of us must do what we can, with what we have in front of us.”

Keith brought his arm up, wiping his eyes with his hands. It hurt. Coran’s words, he knew, were meant to be reassuring. They were, but only to a a small extent.

“I…would assume Number One would also understand how you feel, as well.” Coran quietly sized the half-Galran up. “Once he and the princess return from their diplomatic mission, I’m certain you and he will have a great deal to talk about, as well. Certainly, Allura would wish to learn more about your prolonged captivity and those you befriended! But, in the meantime, I’d suggest resting, and…perhaps doing so in your bed as opposed to your Lion?”

There came a growl from the Lion, which echoed through the hangar.

“Oh, Red Lion, surely you know I mean no offense to you!” The Altean held up a hand towards it, waving her off . “I’m certain you’re a very comfortable creature to sleep in when push comes to shove. But I think you would also agree that your Paladin would benefit from some blink-eye in his own bed, now that he is back here with us.”

“Shut-eye.” Keith looked up, the ghost of a smile on his face. “You mean shut-eye.”

“Yes, that!”

Coran also suggested mixing a non-addictive medicinal drink that King Alfor himself would on occasion imbibe when insomnia and bad dreams plagued him. It was one that Coran enjoyed on occasion when sleep evaded him. That, he suggested, might also help with re-adjusting Keith’s sleeping cycle to something more normal for a human.

He barely finished half the drink before he was snoring in his bed, a puddle of drool forming on his pillow.

Two weeks. More quintants. Still no sign of Shiro and Allura.

The tips of his fingers, and his ears, looked like they could be remotely human, *finally*, even if the rest of him was still purple and furry. His feet were another matter. The pads of his feet suddenly felt heavy, sluggish, like he was stuck to the floor by a ton of gum. He actually didn't notice the slagging trails of…water?...in his wake as he walked the halls with the coordination of a five year old. Coran had to inform him about it, as he was cleaning up right behind him.

All his bones, too, were starting to feel heavy. Gravity felt like pulling him down to the floor, and it took what strength he had just to get to the training room to try and work it out. The training room, where his friends immediately shooed him away – he was to do no training until he was fully changed back (much to his *utter* annoyance, because what was he supposed to do in the meantime?). Or to the kitchen, where he practically found himself inhaling goop like he was going to disintegrate if he didn't, threat of getting sick from eating too much be stuffed.

Or to Pidge's station, where she worryingly noted after taking the blood sample that he was running a much higher temperature and expending more energy than normal, even for a Galra. She told him he'd need to go to bed and take a cold compress, which was even more to his utter annoyance. He didn't want to go to bed, he wanted to make up for his absence and do something.

Going to bed in fact never felt better, but his whole body ached as he laid down.

He made sure to put a towel under his feet as a precaution in bed. Within the hour said towel was completely soaked. By the end of the day he'd gone through every towel he had in his bathroom inventory, and was forced to ask Hunk for his.

"What the—" Hunk stared at his feet. "Um, I dunno how to put this, but…uh, your toe beans look like popped bubble wrap! And slightly green at the edges…you might need to, uh, get those pieces lanced off or something."

The screaming that came from the medical bay, as a result, only lasted

for about five minutes, and everyone was warned beforehand about it. Coran was much less squeamish about the whole situation than Lance, much more proficient at holding Keith down along with Hunk, and *much* better at attempting a surgical procedure that involved creating gaping open wounds as part of the treatment. Even Hunk having his eyes tightly closed the whole time while holding Keith down didn't seem to slow him down none.

He was also better at wrapping bandages in the wake of the inevitable bloody aftermath, as well. Which was just as well, because he couldn't walk, forcing Hunk to carry him back to his room to recover.

"Yo, Keith! Time to wake from your cat nap!"

Lance again.

"Hunk made some chicken soup…ish…stuff, you want some?"

"…No."

"You gonna go see Gunderson to give her a blood sample?"

"No."

"…Are you…*ever* coming out of your room?"

"*No.*" Keith's voice was muffled. Namely, because he was face down on his pillow. "I'm not. I…can't."

Silence reigned from the other side of the door, and Keith found himself regretting not having a remote way of letting the other in. It would have helped. In some way. Keith hadn't intended to wake up the way he had, in any case.

After a few moments, Lance threw the door open, nearly knocking it off its tracks.

"Ha! Pidge's door hacking trick actually works!" The one time Keith was secretly relieved of that, though judging by his tone, Lance didn't seem to be aware of the odd curve of Keith's body beneath his blankets. "Uh, so…are you ok?"

“No.” On the other hand, Keith knew that Lance could see the purple fur and spots of blood all over the room, the walls and the floor. That was on top of the very noticeable splotches of furless – and tender-looking – purple skin on the skin not under his bedding. “I’m not ok. I am the *complete opposite* of ok. This is by far the worst I have ever felt in my life!”

“…You know I don’t mean most of the stuff I say, right?”

“What.” Keith’s response was flat. Where the quiznak was *this* coming from? “What does you teasing me have to do with—“

“I just want you to feel…you know.” A pause. “I know you probably went through a lot with being where you were, but…we never stopped looking for you. Like…we would have never thought differently of you, even if you turned right back into a Galra today. I mean, I know *I* wouldn’t. I’d still make fun of you going all space cat, but…you’re still our team mate. You’re still you. And…I mean, I don’t know how the team would be without you. You know?”

A small growl came from Keith’s throat – no small feat given how his ability to growl from his throat was becoming less pronounced as the days went by and his throat throbbed bobbed, his cords almost wriggling along with everything else. Deep down, it was what he wanted to hear, what he’d hoped with his fellow Paladins.

On the other hand, it was pretty obvious that Lance didn’t actually realize there was a real *reason* Keith was awkwardly laying down face first long after he’d gone to take a nap and didn’t come out, even for dinner.

“…You also don’t have to feel self-conscious about this whole…thing, either. You know, the…reverse-Jeff Goldblum Galra thing.“

“Lance…” The growl got louder. “You are an *idiot.*”

“…Wow.”

Lance sounded genuinely deflated, insulted, as his feet shuffled towards the door. Lance was actually *insulted*? He *seriously didn’t see*—

“See if I try to cheer you up the next time you’re suffering from an accidental space cat transformation. Fine. Just keep sulking in your bed about your problems like a big lazy shedding lump.”

“*Lance,* I’m not *sulking.*” Keith felt what hackles remained go up at the

clear obliviousness on display. “Take the hint, I can’t *move*!”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, really!” Panic began to seep into Keith’s voice from the pillow. He *seriously* didn’t get it still. He had to actually spell it out for him. “I’m not hurt *emotionally*, you dingbat! My spine compressed and snapped in three places while I was napping along with my *ribs*! *I literally…cannot move*!”

“You…your—*what!?*”

It took about five seconds for Lance to throw the blankets off Keith’s body – when in panic, he could actually move pretty fast - then bolt from the room, screaming bloody murder.

It was really five places in his spine, as Keith learned after getting out of the healing pod, a little over several quintants later.

It was very different coming out that second time, as opposed to when he first came back onto the Castle. Everything felt tight, but unlike when he became Galra and it had been his clothes that had been tight from his growth spurt, the tightness was inside, all in his bones, as they did the opposite. It was a feeling of contraction, suppression. He winced as he woke up and feeling returned to him.

“Ok, *just* gonna make a note.” Pidge scribbled into a notebook. “*’Keep Keith in the healing pod for a month the next time accelerated inter-species transformation happens no matter how hard he tries to get out of it’*-”

“Hey! I was—“ Keith’s compressing legs felt like jelly when he stood on them on his own power. “…I was mostly managing before this, I swear.”

He was lying. In truth, his friends had been helpful in ways they likely couldn’t imagine. Especially in comparison to when he turned into a Galra – when he was alone, dying, certain he would never see them again. This time, he wasn’t alone.

So, even though he still felt like his calves were about to melt from under his knees, he smiled.

“Wo-oah! Keith!” Lance was bringing his hand from the crown of his head to Keith’s. “You’re *my* height now!”

“Your fur’s mostly gone, too.” Hunk started, then gulped. “...So’s… most of your hair, actually. You look like a zombie!”

“Hmm, yes!” Meanwhile, Coran was scooping one last giant hairball into an abnormally large beaker. “It certainly explains why your pod filter was making noises this time. I’ll just bring these samples to your room for you to sift through, yes, Number Five?”

“Heehee!” Lance grinned. “The incredible shrinking, balding Keith…”

“I can still punch you, you know.”

“Still worth it.” Lance nodded in approval. “Put a mullet wig on you and you actually kind of look normal!”

“Oh, man, I hope some of these have follicles left on them!” Pidge gratefully took the giant tube from a surprised Coran with a grunt. “Might take me awhile, but this will definitely help with building the complete genetic transformation profile for Keith!”

“Dude, aren’t you forgetting I’m here to help?” Hunk took the beaker from Pidge. “Team Follicle Separation is a go!”

“Bro fist!” A pause. “…When you’re in a position not to drop all that.”

“Haaa, yeah, matted space cat hair is…surprisingly heavy!”

Keith watched as Pidge and Hunk walked off, talking about their ever-so-exciting project, followed by Coran. Bringing a hand to his head, he realized that Hunk wasn’t exaggerating about the hair loss. He could only feel small tufts of hair on his tender scalp.

“…Uh, so…about what I said before?” Lance suddenly spoke up, the smirk lessening. “I meant it.”

“…I know you did.” Keith looked down. “Sorry for snapping at you, man.”

“You’re *sorry*?” Lance’s mouth dropped. “Dude, your spine snapped! Half your body was like a Slim Jim! And…speaking of, *woah*, Allura wasn’t kidding about the scars on your back!?”

Keith frowned, though he didn’t answer Lance’s question. He knew exactly which scars Lance was talking about, and where they came

from. He just wasn't ready to respond to that question just yet. Or most questions about his time on the *İrem*, come to think of it. He'd talk about it, though. Someday. Just not yet.

"So *why* are you *sorry*?!"

A sigh escaped Keith.

"I don't know. Just…this all just sucks. At least when I was turning *into* a Galra…you…didn't have to watch all of this."

Recalling anything too much deeper than that only brought back his screams, setting adrift against the silent stars. Keith swallowed the lump forming in his throat, doing his best to keep his face neutral as he pushed the memories to the back of his mind.

"…Yeah, but." Lance looked down. "That doesn't mean we still didn't worry. And that we don't worry now, even though we now know what's happening."

Keith looked back up at the other, at this.

"...I-"

"...Well, look on the bright side. At least you don't have much further to go and I don't have to clip your bones again?" Lance had already turned, and had begun to walk off. "Then you'll be good old not-space cat Keith again. So…"

"Hey."

Lance stopped, turning to face Keith.

"Yeah?"

"That super-secret mission Shiro and Allura went on." It had been three weeks. "Have they come back yet? Has anyone even *heard* from…?"

"…Coran has, I think." The troubled expression on Lance's face said it all. "But if he knows anything, I…he's not sharing anything about it, and they haven't come back. Sorry, man, I know it sucks, but...I'm as in the dark as you. We all are."

Keith didn't respond again, simply walking past Lance once he got his answer. Sure, Lance had meant what he said about accepting him. He knew, too, from how Hunk and Pidge acted that, for all their making

him a guinea pig, and making cat jokes, and being grossed out and *terrified* by his changes, they weren't scared of him. They accepted it, and him, without question. They all just wanted to help.

Meanwhile, the two people whose acceptance had felt the hardest for Keith to gain – that he feared he might somehow lose again, deep down, even after all the things that had happened – especially after all the things that had happened - were nowhere to be found. One of them he had an idea of what to expect.

But he didn't know what would happen when Shiro returned. If he ever *did* return, after what went down between them.

More than three weeks had passed since they'd left.

Çatışma

Another week and a half went by before Keith woke up from another herb-induced sleep one morning, to realize his hair had mostly grown back.

He quickly got out of bed and staggered to his bathroom mirror. His hair had barely been stubble before he went to bed, but now, he had a magnificent case of bed head. He would never have to endure another bald or zombie joke from Lance again.

More than that, he'd gotten smaller again. He could feel it. It was barely near what last week's back-breaking shrinking adventure had been – an inch at most – but he felt the faint tightness. That, and it was noticeable enough that Keith couldn't help but smile, as he went to his drawers, tossing off the shirt Hunk lent him. He was Keith-sized again, and could finally fit in Keith-sized clothing once more. Heck, even the splotches of purple still on his skin looked more like faint bruises, more reminiscent of a bar fight badges than the under-skin of a Galra. Everything was almost back to normal with his body.

Almost.

Keith paused, looking back in the mirror. He could see the dim highlight of purple in his newly-grown hair. There was a faint ring of yellow which rimmed his scelera, which almost looked like jaundice. His fingers, quietly clenched together, were more spindly than before, as were his arms, albeit less so. His whole body was thinner, though not quite as horrifying as it had apparently been, stemming from his long-term Galra diet and the energy he expended when he turned back. His feet were also, he would later find out after trying to put his shoes on, at least a half-size larger. That wasn't even taking into account the tiny vestigial tail he could feel impotently wriggling back and forth near the bottom of his back.

There were also the scars all over his body – the diluted quintessence had only done so much to heal him back on the ship, it seemed. He had obvious surgical scars on his stomach, on his chest, near his neck, from what was done to save his life from the redundant organs. There were, no doubt, multiple searing scars on his upper back, centered around the nape of his neck, with a few stripes of said scars also hugging the borders of his shoulders. The back of his legs had no sign of the blood blisters, but his upper left leg had a quarter-sized scar on his front. He had no doubt there was a smaller scar of similar shape on

the back of it. He was lucky he got off with just one gunshot wound from the *Heretic*, and that the healing pod could repair him as well as it did.

There was still a limp, though. It was subtle, but as Keith walked he felt it. It had no doubt been like that the whole time, but with everything else happening, he didn't notice.

Overall? He'd looked better, certain felt better. But he'd looked and felt way worse as well.

Then there was the laser barcode on his inner right wrist, still as deep and black as the day the Kommissar forced it on him. He'd actually completely forgotten about it, until his fur had started to fall out. It was easy to forget with everything that had happened, that he was basically little more than a set of numbers with a fake name, like everyone else had been, to people like the Kommissar (ironically as that was when knowing just what she was as well). It was just another means of enforcing the Galra Empire's idea of who – what - they thought he was on him. That he, as a half-breed, was nothing to them on the whole.

The barcode could never be erased and he knew it. Even if he did, he also knew, as he stared down at the Galra numbers beneath the thick bars, that he didn't want to erase it. He didn't want to forget. He couldn't, even if everything else about his time on the *İrem* was erased from every databank, database and datalog in the entire universe, and every item associated with it junked and jettisoned. This was a part of him. This was his proof of his experience, when nothing else was left.

Which made it more surprising when he opened his top drawer and saw his *İrem* suit, folded neatly beneath his folded blue sash. He stared at it for a moment, not sure whether he was just dreaming that he saw it. He blinked, and it was still there.

When…?

He carefully lifted the suit out and unfolded it, revealing two more surprises he hadn't expected. The first was that the damage done to it during the battle against the Helvicta corsairs was all repaired, at least as best as one could repair it on the Castle of Lions. Even the large hole where he'd been shot in the leg had been sewn up with careful, if very uneven and inexperienced, stitches and knots.

The second was the note which fluttered onto the floor from the pant leg, and who it was from.

Fixed while you were "sleeping". Just in case you need it again!

~Allura

At this, Keith stared.

When had Allura done this?

Breakfast had been perfectly wonderful. Almost *normal.*

Pidge bragged about how she'd been right about the timetable, and that the blood samples and information she'd collected every day, from the moment he got back to the Castle (*How did she collect anything when I was in the pod?* Keith wondered. *Actually, do I* want *to know?*) was giving her an understanding of Galra genes and their adaptability that she certainly hadn't had before. Hunk remarked, meanwhile, that though he wasn't absorbing xenobiology quite as well as Pidge was, the research on Keith's changing blood – and the three days spent picking out attached hair follicles - was extremely helpful for the future in figuring out how exactly the blue quintessence was flushed out of his body. Eventually, perhaps, they could aid other half-Galras they might find in a similar predicament – including Keith, if it happened again. Maybe they could reverse the irreversible someday.

Even more surprising, maybe they could even find the *İrem* once more. After all, their call number encryptions were still recorded in the Castle's databases, due to Keith's original hail to them. With some luck, Pidge would be able to unscramble the multiple encryptions which cloaked the ship from normal radio interception – they had to have fixed that machine on the bridge by now, after all - and pinpoint its location almost anywhere in the universe, if they weren't entirely off the grid.

They'd also just have to figure out how to convince the majority of crew members on board that Voltron and its Paladins weren't there to eat whatever future babies they might somehow have, Keith pointed out. That got a few perplexed stares from his comrades.

Soon, he promised. *I will tell you everything, it's just long and complicated.*

And then Lance finally worked up the courage to ask Keith a perfectly stupid question about his ordeal.

"Soooo." It was a question that got him punched in the shoulder by Pidge. "Now that you're mostly back to normal, inquiring minds want to know…did you meet any particularly sexy space cat ladies that might need rescuing from that ship?"

Keith smirked as he turned away with an eyeroll at Lance. As Lance's attention was drawn defending himself from Pidge, and Hunk's to laughing at the situation unfolding in front of them, his smile faltered.

Shiro's spot at the table was still empty, as was Allura's.

After breakfast, Keith found himself officially cleared by everyone but Lance to go train. Lance didn't get a say because he was Lance, and when he tried to say something in protest Pidge put the kibosh on it. Huh. So Lance was still concerned about him, at least, all joking aside.

Bringing one hand through his fully-human hair, and his other holding onto his bayard, he let himself relax as he made his way to the training area. He wanted to get back into the swing of things, but he still felt a little sluggish. Plus, he had no shoes, on account of having grown out of them, so Keith was going barefoot. As a result, he knew he'd still have to take it easy for the time being, which he *hated*.

He heard the sounds of gladiator robots being smashed in half as he got closer to the door. Which was odd, as he hadn't recalled hearing that anyone was going to be training with him. It figured, though, that someone would mother hen him in training, making sure he didn't go to high up on the levels and snap his spine again on accident, even after he'd been cleared. Probably Hunk, or even—

The door opened onto the training area, just as Shiro shattered the last gladiator into spare parts.

"Wh—"

The two Paladins blanched, finding themselves staring at each other. Shiro's eyes were wide with surprise as he brought his bayard back; Keith could only imagine how large his own were.

"Shiro?" Keith's bayard clattered to the floor. "Is that really—"

He wasn't hallucinating. He certainly wasn't dying. He was back and… Keith wanted to punch him. Or hug. him. Both. Do something. *Anything* before Shiro left again.

"End simulation." The remains of the gladiator disappeared. "Sorry. I…I should probably leave, you probably need some space—"

"*No.*"

Keith didn't move, even held his hands up, as he noticed Shiro begin to move towards the door. If Shiro tried to leave, he wasn't sure what he'd do, but he knew he didn't want Shiro to go anywhere.

"Its fine. Really. You don't have to leave."

"Are you sure?"

This was awkward. This was awkward and it sucked. Especially since Shiro seemed far more nervous than Keith was, and Keith was definitely nervous. This was finally happening. They were finally talking. Shiro was finally *back*.

He couldn't just let Shiro disappear on him again.

"I'm positive. Just…don't leave." So Keith held his ground. "If you leave I'll punch you."

"…Point taken."

God this was awkward. Keith was tempted to just punch him anyways, if only to get make sure he didn't leave. If only to let the tension pop and not be so high between them. It shouldn't be like this. But Shiro disappeared again. It was the elephant in the room he couldn't ignore.

"I…" That reminded him. "What..where *were* you? I woke up and you and Allura were *gone*, and no one said *any*thing, no one *could*, and—"

He stared at Shiro's arm, his hand coming up to point. It was Shiro's *Galra* arm that was holding a shifting black bayard, as it went back into its default form.

“You’ve got your arm back.”

“…Yeah.” The other’s face flushed slightly at the observation. “Got rid of that weird internal trigger you put into it, though. That…took awhile.”

“...I didn’t put it in.” Keith was still staring at the arm. “Is that why you left? To get your arm put back on?”

If that’s it…why didn’t you tell us? Why would Allura lie to us? Why—

“No. She was...she was going to a Blade of Marmora cell with the information we got about the Helvicta pirates. To find out if they had anything about Zarkon yet. And to show Voltron was…whole again. Other cells wanted...confirmation, so...we went to them, too.” Shiro swallowed slowly, as if he wasn’t sure if that was really all true himself. “I didn’t know that my arm was going to be part of it.”

“How did you not know why you were going?”

“I swear that Allura didn’t tell me anything. Not until we got to Kırat.” Keith could see the Galra arm clench, even while his own fists clenched with each answer Shiro gave. “And if I’d known I’d be gone this long, I wouldn’t have agreed to it. I didn't want to agree with it or go at all. Not after I promised not to leave you guys again.”

Did this mean Keith needed to punch Allura, too? This was getting increasingly irritating. His blood may not have been begging for everyone’s head on a silver platter anymore, but god if he didn’t just want to *beat something* before he just straight up exploded.

All this unnecessary worry. He thought it was because the two of them were scared of him, or hated him, or felt too guilty to be around him. In the end, it hadn’t been that at all.

Allura didn’t have to keep that quiet. *She didn’t have to—*

Before he knew it, he felt his fist bury itself into Shiro’s solar plexus, with Shiro collapsing right on the floor thereafter, gasping for breath. Instantly, he was grabbing Shiro to pull him back up.

“…Augh…” Shiro sputtered as he slowly brought himself back onto his feet. “I know, I dese—“

“No you didn’t.” Keith shut him down as Shiro held his stomach, coughing. He wasn’t going to let Shiro wallow and think it was all his

fault. “I was just mad, I'm...I'm sorry. Not at you. Just at everything. Allura didn’t even tell Coran.”

His desire to punch Allura was only alleviated slightly.

“Seriously, I'm sorry…are you ok?”

“What?!” Shiro winced. “I should be asking *you* that!”

“And why is that?”

“You’re not Galra anymore.”

“Oh. Well, you don’t have to worry. You missed me making Lance wish he didn’t bring his nail clippers on board.” Keith’s fingers instinctively went over his nails, as if to make sure they were nails and not random claws again. He wishes Shiro had been there, deep down, but it was too late for that to happen, of course. “I’m fine. Tired, but fine.”

His eyes narrowed when he went over what they both said.

“…You know you didn’t answer my question, right?”

Air went through Shiro’s nostrils. Yup, he knew he was caught.

“I don’t know.” His eyes looked over towards where the gladiator had been. “I don’t know what happened to me, and—“

“I thought you got your arm back and Allura didn’t tell you that was going to be part of it?”

“No, I mean…” Shiro sighed. “I don’t know what happened to me *before*.”

Keith stopped, looking up at the Black Paladin. Oh. *Oh.*

Shiro wasn’t talking about the past three weeks.

“You don’t remember how you got out of Black’s cockpit?”

“…I remember attacking Zarkon as Voltron.” Slowly, Shiro walked towards the black walls, slumping against it once he reached it. “Then a bright light, before I woke up in a leaking tube half-filled with goo with gun-toting Galra and pirates around me. That’s basically it.”

So, *more* memories that he suppressed. Or were suppressed in some

other way. Keith looked down at this. Was that just how it was going to be when it came to Shiro? Or—

“Black…Black told me what happened to make me disappear when we got back here.”

Oh. *That* Keith wasn’t expecting at all to come from Shiro’s mouth.

“Zarkon had pumped enough quintessence in himself to fry half a galaxy, if he had known how to fully harness it.” Shiro closed his eyes. “Every ounce of it was still in him all 10,000 years of it. Even after his body stopped being able to process the older energy, it just…stayed in him. That was what the Druids’ power did to the quintessence he absorbed. He was like a quintessence capacitor with unlimited potential. Black could sense it all in him.”

“And when we beat him, he hopefully went boom? Right?”

Oh, good, that that got something that resembled a chortle from Shiro. Maybe. It was a step in the right direction, anyway.

“But what does that have to do with *you* vanishing without a trace?”

“…Black’s connection with Zarkon and me.”

“…*What?*” Keith found himself sliding down next to Shiro. “But… didn’t you sever the connection between your Lion and Zarkon before we—“

“He tried to reconnect. Black thinks he *did* reconnect, at least for a second. Even while he was…” Shiro’s eyes opened, and narrowed as he looked down. “Whatever it was that happened to him when we hit him, when I went through him, when he grabbed Black. All of that energy he had went into that connection like a surge. Through Black, and into me. All too fast and strong for us to even realize it.”

“…So *you* went boom along with Zarkon.” Keith stared at Shiro. “That’s insane. No wonder we couldn’t find you. Your atoms and Black’s connection with them must have been scrambled.”

“I…” His Galra arm ran through his hair. “I really don’t know what it did to me after that. I know I didn’t block it out. I just have vague… thoughts. Feelings. *Things*, you know? Things that terrified me even though I…can’t really remember them. Like a dream, I guess. Maybe I’ll remember it all. Maybe not. I just…”

Shiro's temple throbbed, as Keith watched.

"I didn't suppress them, this time. I…its just…not *there*." Quietly, he shook his head. "I'm fine, but…I don't understand. Black Lion doesn't, either. There's a lot we don't understand. I'm…I'm sure we'll figure it out, though. We've got time now, at least."

And somehow, whatever happened, he ended up with the Helvicta Corsairs. And then Dansci brought him to the *İrem*, where he woke up without any context or reassurance. Keith knew neither of them would ever know exactly how it happened – simply that it happened. However, it also likely meant that Shiro, for all his angrily ramblings on the *İrem*, hadn't been the one to take his arm off.

Maybe there were tracers in it before and they were taken out? Maybe Bok had a thing for trophies? Maybe Bilgin took it off for Dansci? Why the responsible party felt it important to take the arm off to begin with would have to be a mystery, Keith supposed.

"That…" Shiro's face fell further. Oh, quiznak, no— "That still doesn't excuse—"

"No. Don't you—" Did he have to punch him again? "I never stopped looking for you, Shiro. Its why I ended up where I ended up to begin with. Not on purpose, but...when I realized you were on the ship, my priority was getting you back here alive, no matter what."

Keith hugged his knees to his chest. He knew how Shiro felt, but he was determined to not let his leader fall on his sword like that. Or fall on…whatever his bayard became, no matter how seemingly determined Shiro was to fall on it.

"And…I'm not mad at you about that. In case you're wondering. I know you were scared."

"I—" Shiro's head came up, his eyes widened. Oh dear, there was mist in his eyes "*What*?"

"What?"

"But Keith. I shot…innocent people. I *shot you*." Shiro's voice cracked. "I was about to *kill* you because you were *Galra*! I…I didn't even recognize you! *You*, of all people!"

"And I was nearly killed by my crew mates on the *İrem* because they found out I was a Paladin." Shiro let out a breath of surprise as Keith

leaned his head back to the wall with a huff. “And several of them thought I ate Galra babies. I still forgave them.”

“Wh—“

“Yeah, I…” Keith closed his eyes. “You’re the first person I’ve actually said anything really...much about what happened. I promised I’d tell everyone, and I will. They need to know. But I wanted to…you know. Clear the air with you first.”

He took a deep breath.

“I’m upset about you leaving. But I’m not going to forgive you for that.” Since that was Allura’s fault. “That wasn't you. Or for what happened on the *İrem*, because it was an accident. You didn't know. There’s nothing to forgive. I…I get it. Its…scary having that in you.”

He let his breath out. That could be whatever Shiro wanted it to be. His fear of the Galra. The fear of his arm. The “part-Galra” feelings he might have because of his arm. (He had tried to smash it underfoot, after all.) The capability of *hurting* someone. The realization that one could lose control of themselves and their situation so, *so* easily, even just by pure chance.

“Sometimes it just takes looking at things from a different point of view.”

After that, he was silent, as was Shiro, and he brought his hand up to pat the other’s arm. He didn’t know how long the silence, or his shoulder patting, went on. It didn’t matter. That hadn’t gone as badly as Keith had worried that it would. Hopefully, Shiro was taking the words to heart, as well. The fact that Shiro hadn’t just up and left after Keith finished talking was a good sign, right?

Right.

“So…” *Maybe I should change the subject.* “How is your bayard? Do you know what it is?”

“Oh.” Shiro looked down at his bayard. “Actually, my weapon’s…it goes with my arm. Something like a brass knu—“

“Ah, Shiro!” A female voice suddenly chirped from the doorway. “How is your arm doing now? I hope its still att…ached…?”

Allura trailed off as she saw Keith. The mice on her shoulder also

squeaked in surprise.

“Keith.” Her eyes widened. “Oh! I wasn’t expecting you here!”

“Really?” Keith stared at the princess. “I’m always in the training room when I’m not randomly turning back and forth from a Galra body."

“I…I was under the impression you were still changing back and prohibited from training.” Slowly, Allura walked towards the two. “At least last Coran had informed me, though…that was several quintants ago.”

Keith could feel his hands ball into fists.

"...You didn't tell anyone you were leaving."

"I..." Allura's face instantly reddened. "Keith, I needed to-"

"Go to the Blade of Marmora." Keith's voice was flat. He was sitting, though, maybe he could just swipe at her ankles... "And get Shiro's arm fixed. And not tell *anyone* about it."

Allura turned away at this, and Keith knew she was caught. Probably not for the first time, either, judging by just how quick her defenses went down when he verbally cornered her.

"...I'm sorry." She begins to wring her hands. "I...I needed to make contact with the Blade, as we will need to spread out our contacts with what little information we've been getting. And to relay that Voltron is whole, to allay those fears that we may still lack our full strength. But...you're free to be angry with me, I should have said something."

"Yeah." Keith's urge to lash out was lessening as the moments went by. She wasn't trying to dance around things, at least. "Allura, you've told us we need to be more open with one another as a team. And you're part of our team."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Shiro watching him.

"I wouldn't have been mad if I'd known." Keith crossed his arms. "No one would have been mad about it. And honestly, not saying it makes it look like you had something to hide."

"...It won't happen again." Allura looked down. "Still, you're...not..."

Huh?

“S-speaking of which…" Her face was still red. "Shiro, I hope your arm is working well again?”

“…Yeah.” Shiro crossed his legs. “You...did a good job, actually. Its like I never lost it.”

“Y—“

Keith leaned over to look at Allura. Wait--oh.

Ah ha!

“*You* fixed his arm, Allura?”

“Well, I…did have to practice my magic and quintessence control.” Allura sheepishly shrugged, face still a tomato, though it was clearly now due to embarrassment; the mice chittered in a way that sounded like laughing. "That is...magic was part of how Shiro’s arm was constructed to begin with, so I took him off-ship to perform the reattachment.”

“…So you used Shiro as a guinea pig for your magic training?”

“I asked Shiro to *volunteer* after a very long and protracted discussion.” Allura pouted. “It was part of his compensation for him shooting you. The off-world facilities of the cells we visited - which, we still would have had to visit anyways, Keith, don't give me that look!"

He was pretty sure he wasn't giving her any look, but rather rubbing his temples. but whatever.

"...Those places among our allies and allied systems had the proper back-ups for aiding me in re-connecting Shiro with his arm and to ensure his augmentations would produce no unexpected problems down the line!”

“She…didn’t want to blow up the Castle if her powers went awry.”

This earned Shiro a small, pouting glare from Allura, which caused Keith to snort. It was nothing that she should have hidden. Hopefully, hopefully, Allura knew better.

"You still should have told us."

"I *know*!" Allura snapped, but it didn't have any bite. "I...I know."

She was silent at this. All of them were. Keith huffed; he'd forgive her, of course he would. It did seem like she realized that what she did really was the wrong call. She'd know better now, she was learning. Really, they all were. They were a team, after all.

“It…also gave us time to talk.” Shiro’s expression became more somber. “About…a lot of things. About you, especially.”

Keith stiffened slightly. Speaking of teams, even after everything, he still couldn’t help but be slightly worried, given they had more than enough time to talk about, for example, kick him off the team for his recklessness in getting shot off into space to begin with, not to mention the whole Ga—

"I...first things first." Allura cleared her throat. "Are your feet doing better? It was the last thing we'd heard about before...well.”

“...Oh, yeah. That.” Sighing, Keith wiggled his toes to demonstrate that his feet weren’t doing shabby after having entire sections of them carved off like a turkey. “Never better, though I turned into Bigfoot because of it.”

“…Well, yes,” Allura squinted. “Your feet are certainly several chips larger than they were before, now that I look at them.”

“Chips, huh?” Keith brought his foot up into the air, and one of the mice hopped onto it, sniffing it before letting out a disgusted squeak. “We call them ‘inches’, Allura.”

“Keith.” Upon seeing that Keith wasn’t wearing shoes, Shiro frowned. “Were you going to train without *shoes*?”

“Why not? I can’t fit into mine anymore.”

“You really shouldn’t train without footwear,” Allura chided as she sat next to Shiro. “Galra or not, you don’t want to lose your foot digits to a level six gladiator while practicing!”

“I’ll be fine.” Keith huffed, his lip pouting. “I mean, I wasn’t *going* to use gladiators.”

“You’re a terrible liar.” Keith’s eyebrows raised as he heard Allura respond. It was just like being spoken to Ağla. What the *quiznak* was his tell!? “Keith...”

"Yeah?"

"...Look." Allura leaned over to look at him. “About what we talked about when we were gone."

He stiffened again.

Here we go.

"There’s...a lot of things I want to know, but…the primary thing I wanted to ask you was of the coded message you had with you when you returned to us.”

Oh. Well, he was just overthinking it then. Overreacting, actually. Honestly, if they were going to kick him out of Voltron they probably just would have *done* it already, after he woke up, but—

“Coded message?”

“Yes, the…I had shown it to some of the Blade and they were unable to see precisely how to break the code you were using. I even translated it from the Galra script.” Allura’s eyes narrowed slightly, as she took the small pad from her cloak. “I was wondering if you could explain to me the symbolism of these words in the rhyme scheme? If its something you learned on the ship about the Galra Empire's operations.”

Keith blinked as Shiro passed the pad to him. His eyes widened as he read the words in front of him, between the original script and Allura’s translation. He’d seen this before. He *knew* what this was.

Once he realized what he was reading, he burst out laughing, doing so until he coughed, tears in his eyes.

“What?” Allura stood up. “What is it?”

“This isn’t a *code*, Allura.” Keith rubbed his nose. “It’s a *recipe*.”

“Wait, what? Let me see.” Shiro yanked the pad from Keith. “Oh yeah, it is! What were you doing with *this*, Keith?”

“A recipe?” Allura frowned, while the mice let out surprised – and very excited - squeaks. “But I was..everyone was certain the rhyme form was a coded system of…you mean it’s…food?!”

“Yeah, its food.” Keith closed his eyes. “A soup, actually…it’s a long story. Its all a long story.”

“You’ll tell us, won’t you?”

Keith opened his eyes and looked up, at this. Shiro was looking down at the ingredients list, while Allura was looking at him expectantly. She had probably—no, *they* had all worried about him while he was gone, and when he changed back upon his return. Just as he’d worried about Shiro. Just as he'd worried about Allura, and everyone else.

He slowly nods.

“Yeah. I’ll tell you. Definitely.”

That night, Hunk decided to make the soup, and Keith found himself slowly, finally, opening up more about his experience. Mainly because Hunk was so baffled about some of the ingredients that he had to explain them, and that meant delving a little into his time on the *İrem*.

Not that he was upset about it. While he was changing, he hadn’t the energy or the pain tolerance to actually go into detail of the apparent five months or so that he was gone, and everyone had the courtesy to respect that. He also found Hunk’s and Lance’s exclamations of surprise amusing.

“This recipe actually has *diluted quintessence* as an optional add-on!?” Hunk’s mouth dropped. “Dude, no way I’m adding that even if I had any! Did they actually use that in this?”

“Not sure,” Keith shrugged. “I just know Ağla made it for breakfast almost every day and everyone who’s ever tried it *really* enjoyed it.”

“How is this even a real *meal*?” Lance frowned as he grabbed the pad and looked it over. “The powder of the nane plant? Domate paste? Mercimek grain? This stuff sounds like something you use to *poison* someone.”

“Hey,” Keith held his hands up. “I just know that stuff was used for a lot of things. She had me use the quintessence to scrub pans…”

“The raw form of the energy with the highest output of power in the universe, and you were using it to clean cooking utensils. That’s *insane*!” Pidge’s nose flared. “That stuff smells like lentils, too, *ugh*. Are

you sure this isn't the formula to a secret Galra biological weapon that this Ağla person gave to *kill* us?"

"Yes, *geez*!"

Everyone on the team received a steaming hot bowl once Hunk was finished cooking, and they all stared as Keith proceeded to start eating it. He wasn't sure whether Ağla had always used diluted quintessence with the soup, and he could tell that the food wasn't tasting quite the same way he remembered, probably due to his taste buds having changed back to that of a human's. It didn't matter, though. It was still pretty good.

"Well…" Pidge looked at him from under her glasses. "He's not dropped dead yet…"

"If Keith vouches for it's taste," Shiro shrugged. "I'll try it."

One slurp later, and Shiro's eyes were wide as he stared at the ceiling.

"Aaaaaah…!?" His voice was struck with shock and wonder. "*How*…!?"

"Shiro!?" The others looked on, worry clear on their faces. "AAH! What's wrong!?"

Shiro's response was to start eating the soup at a similar pace to Keith's.

"No. No, no no *no*, there's no *way* this soup tastes—" Lance took a slurp, and his eyes dilated. "Ooooh my god*thisisdelicious*."

Coran tried his next. Then Hunk, followed by Allura, with some prodding from the mice who had started licking the sides of the bowls and dipping their noses in the broth. Pidge, holding her nose at the memory of lentil scent, was last to try it.

The big stock pot that Hunk used to make the soup was completely empty by the time dinner was over.

Mutuluk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Several weeks later.

Keith was in his room, looking up at the ceiling and contemplating nothing in particular, when the alarm sounded.

"**PALADINS. WE HAVE A BATTLE ALERT.**" Allura's voice echoed through the Castle of Lions. "**PLEASE ASSEMBLE AT THE HANGAR IMMEDIATELY.**"

He wasted no time getting dressed.

I'm Keith Kogane.

The very first thing he did was wrap his forearm in the belt cloth, just like he did on the Irem. He didn't have to, anymore. He did it anyway.

I'm the Red Paladin of Voltron.

His new Paladin suit – same as the first, though with bigger shoes – was on and secure as he double-timed it to his Lion. He heard his Lion let out a sound of reassurance; it was his first time out and about with Voltron since he'd been brought back, and the first time he'd been just the Red Paladin since a little longer than that.

"We've received intelligence from a Blade transmission that a Galra warship has been strafing important industrial sites on the planet Grellzna." Shiro's voice crackled to life on Keith's helmet comm. "Our objective is to stop the warship from continuing its assault."

"Hmn." Keith gently prodded his Lion to leave the hangar. "Do we know anything about the crew contingency?"

"Not at the moment," came the response from Pidge. "But considering Grellzna is supposed to have already been in Galra hands for centuries…"

"A trap?" Hunk spoke up. "It could be a trap."

"It could be that." Shiro took a breath. "Or…it could be an attempt to

suppress rebellion."

"I'd be chomping at the bit to be free, too. Seriously, this long without a peep from Zarkon and his buddies?" Lance chortled. "And the Galra in the neighborhood attacking hard targets like that when arriving at a planet? We should totally help this rebellion happen, don't you think?"

"Oh, please." Keith smirked. "I don't need to think about it, Lance, I'm already halfway to the ship."

"Wh—*heeeey*!" Lance's whining came through the comms. "You promised, no more boarding weird junk ships without us!"

"I'm just flying towards it, and its definitely not a Helvicta ship. There's a difference."

"Keith." Shiro's voice had a tone of sternness - and wariness - to it that he knew better than to mouth off at. Of course he wasn't actually going to do anything, he really had learned his lesson, but it wouldn't have been Shiro if he wasn't worried. "I know you're joking right now, but seriously, please don't engage until we're all there."

"*Yeah.*" Pidge's voice was far less subtle with its annoyance. "If you go on without us again and pull another five-month sabbatical playing radioactive space cat, I swear I will shoot the scut on your butt with my bayard when we get back to the Castle. Repeatedly."

I'm a former midshipman in the Galra Empire military.

"Geez, calm *down*, Pidge." The Lion stopped, letting out a growl. "I wasn't planning on going any closer."

"You better not have!"

"I'm just outside this ship's known small-object sensor range. Don't worry, seriously." Keith's eyes narrowed as he watched the massive ship suddenly come to life. "The ship's on the move. It looks like its starting to cruise down towards the planet's southern hemisphere."

"Space Cat Keith's right! I've got a visual now and its on the move." Everyone could probably hear Keith huff at the epitaph. *Thanks, Lance.* "Pidge, anything in that direction we should know about?"

"Aside from the planetary capital, where a large majority of the infrastructure and population is? Nothing *particularly* special."

“Then our work’s cut out for us.” Shiro was quick to join the other two Paladins. “If we’re careful we might be able to get the jump on the ship before they can spot us.”

"Roger that." Lance's knuckle-cracking was just audible. "Blue and I can take lead with the sonar waves. Lead fighters from the ship and let you guys hit direct while they're distracted with me."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, sure! Allura's ready to scramble and knock their comms, and without the comms they won't be able to coordinate for a pronged attack as efficiently. Especially if we don't have all five of us attack at once - they're not expecting us to begin, so that and me taking up distraction duties should throw them into some disarrray."

"...Then I’ll be your back-up.” Shiro was right behind them again. “Hunk, Pidge, you up for being part of the second wave?”

“Fine with me,” Pidge sounded distracted. “Gives me time to try and hack their primary weapons systems. Hunk, you gonna cover me?”

“Yeah.” Hunk paused. “Hey, Keith, you’re ok with this, right? I mean, the whole...fighting this kind of ship...and...well.”

I’m half-Galra.

“Yeah. I"ll be ok.”

Keith stared at the ship in the distance, steeling himself for what was to come. He knew where the concern was coming from. But he was certain no one he'd have known was anywhere near the ship, much less in the same galaxy as Voltron was in.

“Let’s do this. I’ll take lead with Lance.”

The skirmish was brief, but brutal. It came to transpire that the Galra warship was loaded to the gills with hundreds of pilots and fighter ships. An entire legion of the Galra military, intended for the planetary surface as an expeditionary force once Grellzna was softened up for re-taking, followed by a blockade to prevent other systems from potentially helping the burgeoning resistance.

Most of that manpower was not expecting the Lions to surprise them, and as a result of the attack, the scrambling of comms and weapons, and the subsequent forming of Voltron to battle the main ship once the battle reached its apex, many died before ever loading into their vehicles. Those that did survive were captured by the Grellzna when they touched down, or directly taken in by the Castle of Lions themselves, to be transferred to the Grellzna after being processed.

As Voltron de-fused, and the Lions made their way back to the Castle, Keith leaned back and sighed. He definitely knew some of his sadness about the deaths they had no doubt inflicted had leaked into their bond, as well as some other memories he hadn't gotten into detail with at that point. He'd not been deliberately withholding, not at all. He was talking about it, slowly. Opening up. Some knew more than others. Shiro knew more than everyone, though everyone seemed to expect that. But he was talking to the others, as well.

His own thoughts, his own sadness, stemmed much more from the realization of how many of those Galra on the ship could have been passing, *were* passing, and were half-breed, like him. How many were full-blooded, but didn't know any better from experience than to obey the oh-so Holy Zarkon. Full-blooded Galra who were maimed, injured, no doubt destined for unwanted target practice should they ever return to the Empire.

I'm the former crew member of the GESS Irem called 'Kılıç'.

~You are saddened by this carnage, Paladin.~

~I'm…~ Keith closed his eyes. *~I know this is war and it can't be avoided.~*

~…You miss them.~

Keith took in a deep breath.

~How can I not?~

~Do not be saddened. You had to leave them.~ The sensation of a purr, followed by something akin to a cat hopping into his lap. If said lap was somewhere in his brain. It somehow made sense. ***~You are a Paladin, and you can fight for them. You will do that, will you not? ~***

~Of course I will.~

There was no hesitation in his answer. No needing to think about it. It was the truth, and there was no need to hide it from his Lion. There was no reason to anymore.

“…Keith,” Someone’s voice finally came through on the comms – Hunk’s. “So can I just say, that movie in your memory was awful, I can see why you got drunk.”

“Oh.” Keith let out a snort. “*That’s* what you got from me when we became Voltron?”

“*Seriously!*” Lance whimpered. “The musical was *so much better*!”

“The ending to *that* was dumb.” Pidge’s voice was flat. “Seriously, Zarkon is a literal deus ex machina with comical special effects? Who thought *that* was a good idea?"

"I don't know. I..." His mind went back. The entire clutch was gone. Outside of the Irem, he was the only one who remembered anything about them. "It was her favorite movie. That I know."

"...Oh." Silence. "That's right. I'm sorry, I didn't mean...you know, anything about her or anything."

"It's ok, Pidge." Shiro's voice was reassuring. "I'm sure Keith understands you weren't being cruel about it."

"I know, it's just...it had a happy ending." Keith wasn't sure if he was the one to explain why Lēkhaka would like such a simple movie, but somehow it made some sense, the more he thought about it. "That's probably why. Everyone honestly enjoyed it even though they knew it wasn't really...real?"

He'd been lucky. He'd gotten a happy ending. Lēkhaka hadn't. He wasn't really spiritual, or consider himself such, but he had to wonder if, maybe, being remembered by someone was a happiness for someone in her - in *their* - position and of itself. If so, he'd try to make her proud.

"...Still, I guess..." Pidge sighed. "That’s terrifying revelation #77386378 from Keith’s time with the Galra that he forgot to tell us – they are capable of making cheesy films.”

“And they do dance numbers,” Hunk cut in, “Don’t forget that part!”

“Yup.” Lance’s voice was in awe as his own reflections recalled Keith’s

melded memories. “And their musical female leads are cute ingénues that can rip creatures twice their size in half while sincing in six different octaves. Now, that *is* pretty terrifying…”

The group proceeded to talk about the films from Keith’s memories. Pidge razzed Lance about him wanting to hit on the female lead, Hunk teased him as to what Allura would think of Lance hitting on someone else, Lance complaining that his teammates were being *super mean poopheads* or something like that. Keith had zoned out from the discussion at that point.

“Keith?” Shiro’s voice cut through the chatter, bringing Keith out of his thoughts. “What’s up? Are you ok?”

“Am I…?”

Keith looked at his console as he mulled over Shiro’s words. Then, he looked at his wrapped arm. His question brought back his discussion with his Lion, not a few minutes before.

He thought of those he’d left behind, those he wished that he could have taken in that escape pod as well. Oğul, the kid his age who just wanted to make his father proud. Ağla, the priestess-cum-cook who could tell when someone was lying. Teori, the guy who had ever only wanted to be a doctor, and Lēkhaka and Hemşire, the last ones of their clutch. Bilgin, the brilliant scientist who they said lost his mind, and Dansçı, who truly lost it for real. Topal and Copal, the twin navigators who went from one cage to another, with Bakıcı, the caretaker who knew what happened after a soldier left the war.

And Sarışın. Just Sarışın.

Them, and all the others.

He clenched his fist, bringing it to his lips.

“Yeah. I’m all right.”

In the end…no matter what I am…I’ll never forget that I’m me.

“Let’s go home, guys.”

I think I can live with that.

Chapter End Notes

ATTN:

The final notes of Admiral Otac have been declassified.

İrem'in Ek Vaka İncelemesi

[The following are excerpts from the personal papers of Admiral Otac, GEISF. They are anticipatory briefs in the dossiers of select members of the Galra Empire Inclusivity Initiative, written for the express purpose of summarizing basic information of actions taken and personnel under the admiral. This was done primarily for the pleasure of a future successor to his position, in the case of his demise or other unfortunate condition which would render him unable to perform his duties, thus necessitating replacement. Given the often brutal nature of life as a Galra Empire soldier, high-ranked or not, such briefs are commonplace for those in positions of command.

[All of the following are considered classified, and dissemination of such information to outside parties carries the penalty of death. This document will be updated as pertinent information is disclosed.]

Kılıç

Rank: Midshipman

Age: ~20 yıl

Heritage: Half-Galra, half-Drule

Original Name: Click

Sash: Blue

Code: 8-869-464-705585

Admiral's Notes: *The newest member of the GESS* İrem. *I am surprised that this particular candidate hasn't been brought to my attention beforehand, or even mentioned to me as having been recruited through the*

normal channels. Then again, surprise is the order of the now.

I will admit to my successor (should I have one, at this point much is up in the air) that as I write this, there is a great deal of chaos happening in our Empire. The past several yıl *– no, the past several* aylar *have been very uncertain, and there has been a seismic shift in policy again, further favoring the Druids and their strange, secret schemes. Now, we have an unexpected and complete shutdown in communications, and a three-system vicinity blockade of Central Command. The blackout of information surrounding this development is complete, and not even Holy Zarkon's closest commanders are able to establish contact with the Emperor.*

T here are now many ongoing questions and worries regarding Holy Zarkon's abrupt disappearance from general communications, and there is of course the Druids' and their leader's silence on the situation that is unfolding with our leader's condition, whatever it might be. There are even fearful whispers that a certain person has been called from his duties as a soldier to bear the unbearable for the good out the universe, and that Voltron was sighted near Central Command's location just before the blackout began. If this is so, then Holy Zarkon's absence is suddenly very simple to explain, and then I cannot begin to wonder what will happen as we head into the future. Especially if the Druids continue to hold the ear of the one in charge. I cannot properly express my thoughts on the possibility that I may wake up to an existence where Holy Zarkon is not the constant which guides our Empire's course. It is terrifying to even contemplate.

My successor will have to forgive my less-than-professional pondering as I write this individual's dossier amid this moment of worry, if I decide not to delete it later. In truth, I am wondering what will happen now as this newcomer is welcomed onto the İrem*, and not just with the uncertainty of the situation surrounding Central Command, the Emperor and Empire at large. There has been a lack of communication from our Processing base on Yeşil, be it from my men or even from the Corsairs who control the facility. That Kommissar Ahtapot would be finishing up Processing for a newcomer on the ship, after said newcomer was, apparently, unceremoniously jetted into an escape pod without even so much as a good explanation from our side, is not normal. (I will, however, advise my successor that any notes written by the Kommissar should be taken with a grain of salt – especially when she's calling someone who has only just arrived and not yet worked a gün "worthless".)*

Something is not right, and I fear what might be afoot. I must ensure the İrem *is safe, and I will personally do so. Once I have done completed that task, I will take measure of this newcomer personally.*

Dansçı

Rank: Scholaris, Second Rank *Cumatilis*, First Division

Age: ~21 yıl

Heritage: Galra

Original Name: N/A

Sash: Purple

Code: 5-869-038-559008

Admiral's Notes: *A member of Holy Zarkon's own personal guard.*

The Scholares (which is the plural of Scholaris, I should note) are "proto-Paladins", a group of creatures who are raised from childhood to heighten their physical and psychic abilities to incredible lengths, in the hopes of using their talents to awaken a link to one of the Lions of Voltron. Of course in general the populace knows that Voltron would be safer in our ruler's hands as a general point, but only higher-ranked officials are aware that Holy Zarkon Himself is the Black Paladin, and thus needs four others to nominally control the four unclaimed Lions in order to fully secure the weapon. Hence the candidates are divided into four groups called schola, each schola a group of candidates for one of the unclaimed Lions. Of course, those who fail to bond are still retained in high honor and are generally used for high-sensitivity jobs (guarding the crown prince, governing districts of the homeworld in His absence, assassinations, etc.).

Dansçı's herself was in the Blue Paladin schola Cumatilis*, and her records indicate that her talent was above-average in all fields, being described as 'perfectionist' and 'desiring the best', high praise indeed. However, at some point after the ritual performance required all Scholares must undertake to try and bond to her intended Lion (by all accounts, she failed, as so many others before and after her, in this difficult endeavor, but performed spectacularly nevertheless), she began showing signs of increasing mental instability, to the point where she claimed the Blue Lion spoke to her and*

had increasingly violent episodes, ultimately resulting in injury to several Druids.

In normal circumstances, Dansçı would have been required to end her life for the dishonor to Holy Zarkon, and she had attempted. However, Bilgin's entry onto the İrem *allowed her the choice to join the crew. Unfortunately, Dansçı has not been treated for what has happened, and my repeated attempts to gain her the correct medical attention has been repeatedly rebuffed by Central Command. Though she is currently in a stable condition, she has not fully recovered, has had several prior relapses, and I caution my successor to keep a close eye on her, lest she begin to exhibit her more violent behavior again.*

It must be especially stressed that because of her background, Dansçı is the best-trained individual of the entire crew, and her losing control and attacking other crewmembers would more than likely result in fatalities. My successor would do well to ensure that the guards on board keep all weapons from Dansçı and to prohibit the Kommissar from placing her in positions where she is able to get hold of a loaded Heretic.

Bilgin

Rank: Limited Duty Officer

Age: ~32 yıl

Heritage: Galra

Original Name: N/A

Sash: Purple

Code: 5-869-533-061580

Admiral's Notes: *The inventor of the Heretic. Accepted onto the* İrem *before Dansçı, and upon his insistence was allowed to invite his sister on board. His reason for being accepted was due to an accident which occurred during his posting on the Draga gunnery satellite, resulting in*

partial lobotomy.

I must use the word accident loosely, however. After looking over the injury in question which brought him onto the ship to begin with, reviewing the timeline of his sister's unfortunate circumstances, reading all reports related to the incident, and even personally examining the detached piece of brilliance personally alongside Teori, I have to question if the injury truly was accidental, as the military at large seems to or wants to believe. The way that said injury supposedly lobotomized him would have and likely should have killed him, if the accident actually played out precisely as the report on it states. Nor would he have retained enough of his intellect to fire a gun properly, much less construct one. There has certainly been some loss of emotional control and he has failed several quotient matrices which before he had easily passed during his officer testing, but the loss seems to be completely centralized, as opposed to general, as what should have been expected.

Of course, I have no way to prove this in any way. I doubt that it will matter in the long run if I, or my successor could prove anything. He is on this ship with his sister, and if he was willing to sacrifice his career and future to be by her side and watch over her, I would rather not risk him lopping another part of his mind – and maybe truly losing him - if we tried to separate the two.

I should note here, in case my successor should find it odd to believe given his current propensity to violence, that Bilgin and Dansçı are indeed brother and sister, related by blood, and were sold as children to become Scholares. Bilgin had been considered for a schola, trained for several years, but he far older than the average beginner when bought, was difficult to control even then and his intellect was deemed more appropriately used in other endeavors. Hence if my successor looks through records to find his schola registration, they ought not to find this particularly shocking.

Ağla

Rank: Lieutenant/Chaplain

Age: ~25 yıl

Heritage: Half-Galra, half-Medan

Original Name: Qal'a *kohini*

Origin: Meda

Sash: Blue

Code: 5-869-533-061580

Admiral's Notes: *The official chaplain of the* İrem*. She is trained in the art of medaciology, which is normally considered a field of spycraft, but in her culture is the mark of a trained shaman. She of course has been trained to abstain from lying as a result, which is covered more in her official dossier and my own report on Medan culture, should my successor wish to look into it further. She has since also become the chef of the* İrem*, and I have made orders to ensure she only be put on Galley Duty because of the resulting development of her skills, which includes minding the crew's varying nutritional needs.*

(I would also like to stress to my successor, if Ağla is still alive by the time they are appointed, that while on board they should try Ağla's soup. Her breakfast recipe, in particular, which her culture calls "bride's soup" but which we call "Akordeon chop soup", is better than the imperial chef's, and with less resources. Obviously, I don't need to tell my successor that last part can never be uttered to Holy Zarkon or His chef.)

I found her during the conquest of the planet Meda, within enclaves of half-breed villages which were descended from rebel expatriates. Of course, we had to imprison many of the surviving original rebels, as is standard procedure for those who are not considered high-priority criminals. Many of their descendants surrendered to our mercy; those who didn't fought bravely to the end.

Ağla was a priestess of her village, and was the one who personally sued me for peace. As I was immediately aware of her and her countrymen's heritage, I was able to offer her and those willing a chance to join the Inclusivity Initiative, as part of the negotiations. As a result, she wasn't the only one who volunteered for the Inclusivity Initiative; three dozen other half-Medans also volunteered. Unfortunately, only seven survived Processing, and as of this writing Ağla is the last half-Medan from that group that is still alive. Her fellow half-Medans died due to the complications which come from the high radioactivity of the İlçeler Nebula's unique quintessence, and according to Teori's autopsies, Medans

in general seem to have a great susceptibility to developing morbid conditions from elantinery exposure.

As a result, I cannot continue to preserve the half-Medans through the avenue of Processing. I have been able to secure the remaining survivors a place together in one of the less-rigorous mining colonies; it is not ideal, but it is the best I can do.

Teori

Rank: Lieutenant/Doctor

Age: ~28 yıl

Heritage: Half-Galra, half-Balmeran

Original Name: Tıp

Origin: Biber

Sash: Blue

Code: 5-869-236-690173

Admiral's Notes: *The medical doctor of the* İrem. *He is in charge of the medical needs of the ship, as well as any autopsies needed. Teori is one of a common type of half-breed, and likely the most common type, where a Galra takes a Balmeran paramour, resulting in a child which can easily blend into normal society without being outed. It is likely there are many billions of half-Balmoran individuals throughout the Empire, though as long as they are able to 'pass', they are the safest of all half-breeds.*

Teori was found due to an accident which exposed his blood to a hemospectrograph, which detected the non-Galra blood in him. For the crime of impersonating a Galra he and his father (his mother's identity is unknown) were sent to the Fescalinir labor mines on a lifetime sentence. A subsequent epidemic of Fesca lung rot brought him to my attention, due to his actions of saving multiple lives of the guards and miners. His father was

also offered a pardon, though this was categorically refused. He has since been transferred to a labor mine in a different jurisdiction. Attempts to locate him have been unsuccessful thus far.

I would like to stress to my successor that Teori is an experienced doctor in several general fields, and that it would be important to continue his education in some manner. Given the special needs of several of the crewmembers, it is imperative that Teori be ready and able to handle any potential medical problem which might arise. Hands-on experience will likely be the best option, along with any updated medical books as can be found. His look into Bilgin's brain and its anatomy has been most illuminating as to piecing together the likely truth of the said scientist's 'accident'.

However, he is not yet experienced in surgery, as it was not his field of expertise when he was 'passing'. It is recommended that any potential surgical procedure that may need to be performed on any crew members should be brought to my attention or to the attention of my successor. Arrangements for a more experienced surgeon will be made in this situation.

Topal/Copal

Rank: Navigator

Age: ~45-48 yıl

Heritage: Galra

Original Name: N/A

Sash: Purple

Code: 5-868-960-244127, 5-868-960-244128

Admiral's Notes: T*he two navigators of the* İrem*, who are also fraternal twins. Topal is the female of the pair and the elder of the two. Copal is the male of the pair and the younger of the two.*

The two navigators are individuals who have a very rare genetic defect known as which leaves them in a severely enfeebled, physically degenerate state. Their parents, officers stationed at the Perinktin Naval Space Station refused to register them properly with their sector's Department of Statistics due to this, so I do not know their precise date of birth or age. What I am aware of, however, is that said parents began to confine them beneath their residence, having built a small, soundproof 'dungeon' for the two to live in without others being aware of their existence. They ultimately lived there for approximately 18 yıl.

I will not go into detail about the abuses that occurred in that 'dungeon'; if my successor wishes to, I still have my briefs and legal writings about their case, and the unfortunate end sentence of it (of which my successor will find my opinion of the whole affair in grand, bunt detail). I will simply say that I met the twins because I was called, as the base commander, to investigate the claims of confinement made by neighbors, and when I discovered them, placed them in my protective custody. After I helped prosecute the court-martial of the parents - which ended with a conviction with minimal sentence of 'altering state property' – I successfully made the twins my wards, so as to prevent their parents from regaining custody. Topal and Copal have been in my custody ever since, and they volunteered for my ships when I was posted elsewhere. They have been on the İrem *since, with their knowledge of star charts and navigation a boon to the crew.*

I must stress to my successor that the twins have a very special diet and way of feeding due to their condition, and that any questions they have about it should be referred to either Teori or their caretaker, currently Bakici. They are also fitted with a special microchip which allows them to pilot the ship regardless of their location on the Irem, to allow them more freedom of movement, so my successor need not worry about their constant absence from the bridge. Most importantly, however, my successor must keep in mind my notes on Ahtapot in regards to any actions she tries to take towards the navigators, and to not allow her to alter her limitations towards punishing the twins. Any actions taken by the twins (i.e. biting, hitting, kicking, etc.) that could be punishable should be taken up with their caretaker.

Ahtapot

Rank: Kommissar

Age: ~49 yıl

Heritage: Half-Galra, half-Hapalochlaenian

Original Name: Lunulata

Origin: Hapalochlaena

Sash: Blue (not worn)

Code: 0-868-971-204737

Admiral's Notes: *The Kommissar of the* İrem. *The Kommissar of any given Galra military ship, no matter the branch, is assigned to ensuring the ship's primary objective is fulfilled, and to take musterof the crew, and ensure all rules and regulations of the Empire's armed forces are properly obeyed. Discipline and morale is of utmost importance; the Kommissar has the former down. In a manner of speaking. I cannot say she inspires the latter.*

I would like to stress firmly to my successor that Ahtapot was not my first choice of Kommissar. In truth, I have long requested a transfer for her, even being aware that she had, since childhood, 'passed' as Galra to escape stigma of her origin as a partly-aquatic species and technically would belong with us on the İrem. *Indeed, she was discovered some time ago, but by that time she had gained several allies in Central Command, those she'd served under, who were fine with protecting her from Holy Zarkon's learning of the truth. She has not gone through Processing, also as a result, though regulations of the Inclusivity Initiative clearly require her to do so.*

Her behavior is incredibly erratic, and unnecessarily violent, as a result of her past of constant efforts to 'pass' and be a 'role model' half-breed. Of course, Central Command finds her behavior acceptable and continue to renew her commission; they see her behavioral tendencies as 'healthy' in inspiring the crew of the İrem *to 'be more like us'. I can't find myself being able to agree personally, as I see it as nothing more than the type of self-hatred I wish to dispel from my own crew's psyche (and especially my son – note to self, delete this part of the sentence at some point), not to reinforce it. This is especially more pressing since her behavior has caused a great deal of problems, INCLUDING fatalities that would warrant a*

court-martial in normal circumstances.

However, officially I and my successor must abide, as those who approve of her as a 'rare' example of a 'good' half-breed are also among those who hold what little funding I can get for the Inclusivity Initiative (and claim any fatalities on the İrem *are just 'proof' that certain species aren't cut for Galra life. I strongly request my successor to hold their tongue for the sake of the Initiative if their future crew's deaths are similarly dismissed). Still I do my best to ensure she doesn't severely and permanently hurt anyone on the crew, and I hope my successor will do so as well. Given that she is very intense on obeying the rules and regulations, as a 'good' full-blooded Galra would naturally do, any new limit I can reasonably implement without scrutiny which prevents her from exacting more fatalities, I implement.*

On an absolutely related note, Ahtapot is NOT to engage with EITHER navigator (Copal and Topal) in ANY WAY. The caretakers who oversee the well-being of the navigators have been ordered to inform me of any possible infraction of that nature, directly to me, through one of the commanders with access to the bridge. I strongly encourage my successor to continue this action.

Sarışın

Rank: Commander

Age: over 500 yıl

Heritage: Galra

Original Name: N/A

Sash: Purple

Code: 0-868-910-188609

Admiral's Notes: *Current Foundry manager on the* İrem. *A reliable worker, though I am aware others would disagree due to her sometimes abrasive personality. My former aide-de-camp and personal secretary for*

several years, until the commissioning of the İrem. *A Galra with a very long past who volunteered primarily to receive a full and unconditional pardon, for crimes committed under her birth name.*

I have also decided to spare my successor the very (very very) long explanation of her long life and her multiple identities in this brief file. She is the longest-lived individual on the ship, and likely one of the longer-lived Galra one might meet in this universe, which is startling given her obvious handicap. Instead I will simply state that she was born without limbs to a couple of full-blooded but otherwise normal Galra citizens, and that her known sublings and descendants do not share her condition. Its quite likely her condition is due to her parents' exposure to the hazardous raw runoff, so common with older quintessence mining technology, before she was whelped.

I will also make a severely abridged list of her previous occupations. She was, among other things, a miner, a pirate, a troupe actor, an Arena gladiator (and a Champion who gained her freedom when such was once possible, at that), a trader, a midwife, a bespoke tailor, a catador, and satrap of Qwarz VI. (She calls her time on the İrem *her 'easy retirement', which I do not doubt. Especially compared to anything with regards to the situation in the Qwarz system that has developed in the past several centuries.) Whoever my successor might be, they can be assured as they read this that the actual dossier that I have managed to compile with my own independent research on her life is massive. Simply perusing the first volume would take a week; it would be best to read it on down time when possible, instead of in one go.*

I will say, from my own personal experience as well as from what I've researched, that she is incredibly dangerous and capable of shooting four guns simultaneously, despite her obvious limitations. Indeed, outside of Dansçı I can say currently she is the most capable fighter on the ship. Her experience with piracy and negotiation has also proven useful when dealing with the Helvicta Corsairs for long-term supply and trade deals, especially in regards to any intel we might deign to give them to ensure continued cooperation and mutual benefits on both sides.

I will note to my successor that if circumstances had been different, I would have readily appointed her Kommissar of the ship, in place of Ahtapot. Unfortunately, her criminal history, and the risk of said past being fully uncovered (in spite of her past use of aliases) would have no doubt jeopardized her life and the mission of the Irem and the Inclusivity Initiative. I unfortunately had to acquiesce to Ahtapot's placement on the ship.

Still, regardless of her past, I trust her to protect the crewmembers to the best of her ability should anything happen, given that she has saved my own life on more than one occasion on the battlefield. My successor can be assured that if she's still alive when they take my place, they can depend on her wholeheartedly to do what needs to be done.

Oğul

Rank: Commander

Age: 19 yıl

Heritage: Half-Galra, half-Laleawan

Original Name: Oğuz Zizifun

Sash: Blue

Code: 0-868-987-605269

Admiral's Notes: *My son. My only son.*

Perhaps in another life, things might have been different. Your mother would still be alive, you would be in a proper academy, and we would all live on that moon I once told you about. The one you wrote that story on when you were learning to write. I still have it, in my pocket. I never go anywhere without it.

That beautiful satellite where you could see the three suns with the three different colors, and at night, you can see the planet we would revolve around, a cold and bright multi-colored marble. Its true we might not have been able to sprout mice from the crop stalks, like in your story, and I'd have had no military salary to work with, but we would have been able to make a small living for ourselves, nevertheless. We would have done all right.

That will never be. I was a fool to think it could have been. When Holy Zarkon demanded the firstborn of His commanders to join the Scholares, I

could not refuse. And when they checked your blood, I could think of nothing but finding a way of sparing you. I did what I thought was right. Your mother had already been lost to the sword of our people for being yarıldı. *I let her go, because she made me promise not to chase her. I couldn't promise the same for you. I acted.*

The moment you came out of Processing that first time, I watched several clicks away. You don't know this, but I cried the whole time. I realized too late what I was doing. I was hurting you. I was throwing away your future. I was throwing away your dreams, your hopes, for your life. I've never figured out if I've done the right thing since.

Even now, though, knowing you do not need me anymore – you have grown up so! - I am still too selfish. You are all I have left. You are the only reason I haven't simply opened the airlock and leaped out. Your existence is the only constant in my life which I know to be true. I find myself questioning Holy Zarkon and His wisdom daily – how can a just ruler kill an innocent child whose only crime is being born? How can I continue on, knowing I can only have doubt about him? Nor does being a warrior hold any more joy or honor for me. Each innocent face I see, each non-military life I hold in my hands, is that of a son like you, or a mother like her. A brother, a sister, a father.

What crime did most of them commit? Existing! So many, many more than I could have even realized, having Galra blood and no Galra face! Even having no Galra blood no longer concerns me. They are all in danger! They must be protected, should they not? Are we not the enlightened race of the cosmos, as we were all told, by He who we exhault as our savior? Are we not supposed to lift them up from ignorance? And yet, it is not the uplifting of ignorance I find, but murder! Blood! Torture and cruelty! Death, and dying, all around me!! Why???

What is worst of all is that I cannot save them all. No one can, and no one else will. I keep thinking, each night, I could have saved more. That old deaf woman. The young half-breed with the three arms. The children of the Glow. So many others. All dead. Ah how my eyes have opened. It is only the comfort that you must live, that you and your crew on the Irem must survive, that keeps me going. That allows me the privilege of breathing the same air as you.

Please, my son. Though you will never see these words, I can only hope you will one day forgive me.

(I will delete these notes later, and create a more proper brief for my successor. They do not need to be subjected to my ramblings.)

Shiro

Rank: Champion

Age: Approximately 22-27 yıl

Heritage: Human

Original Name: Takashi Shirogane

Sash: None

Code: Prisoner No. 117-9875

Admiral's Notes: *Oh my god. No, this cannot be right. This cannot be right. This cannot*

Where did Bok get this information? This must be a lie. This cannot be the reason that this all happened. Was this why he attacked my ship? Why he had Champion to begin with? And this information…how could he have gotten it? There was nothing of this sort that even existed in the military data banks.

Unless. He found a way into another source of information. He would surely have with how lax our empire's security was regarding him. He was just another pirate to them. No one but I was keeping any eye on him. And if this is indeed what my son says it is, if this comes where we believe it does—

He knew I would find this if he failed. He knew what would happen if he failed and I had to bring him in alive. Now, he is dead, and it is only a matter of time before someone learns of Bok's fate. Only a matter of time before they realize the breach Bok created. The information he learned.

Only a matter of time before they dig deep enough to find their scapegoats.

Epilogue: Düşüş

.--. .-. .. ... --- -. . .-. ... -.-. .- -. -.-. --- -- .--. .-.. . - . -.. .-.-.- ... ..- -... .--- .
-.-. - .. ... --- ..-. ... .--. . -.-. .. . .- .-. - ....- -- .- -. .- ... -.-- . - .--. .-.
--- .--. . .-. .-.. -.-- -.-. .-.. .- ... . -.. -.. ..- . - --- .-.. .- -.-. -.- --- ..-. ... - ..-
-.. -.-- .-.-.- .--. .. -.-. -.- . -.. ..- .--. ..-. .-. --- -- ... . .- .-. -.-. .... -.-. - ---
.-. -..- ..--- ..--- ----. ..--- ----- .---- -.... -.-- .- --.. .- -. -.. -... .-. --- ..- --. .... - -
--- .- .-. . -. .- -.-. .. .-. -.-. ..- .. - .-.-.- -.-. .... .- -- .--. .. --- -. .-.-.- -... .-. ---
..- --. .... - .. -. ..-. --- .-. ...- .- .-. -.-- .. -. --. . -..- .--. . .-. .. -- . -. - .- .-.. -.-.
--- -- .--. .- - .. -... .. .-.. .. - -.-- ... -.-. .- -. .-. . ... ..- .-.. - . -..- .--. . -.-. - . -..
--. . -. . - .. -.-. .--. .-. --- - . .. -. -.-. --- -.. . -- .- .-. -.- . .-. ... .---- ----. --..--
----- ----- ----- ..--- ----- --..-- ----- ----- ----- .-. . ... ..- .-.. - .- -. - --. . -. . - ..
-.-. .--. .-. --- - . .. -. -.-. --- -.. . -- .- .-. -.- . .-. ... . ----. ..--- --..-- .---- ....-
..--- .---- ----. --..-- ...-- -.... ..--- .- -.-. - .. ...- . -- .- - -.-. .... ..-. --- .-. ... ..-
-... .--- . -.-. - --.. ----. ----. .-.-.- ..... .--. .-. --- -... .- -... .. .-.. .. - -.-- --- ..-. ...
.--. . -.-. .. . ... -... .- ... . -.. .- -. -.-. . ... - .-. .- .-.. --- -.-. -.-. ..- .-. .-. . -. -.-. .
--- ..-. -- .- - -.-. .... .-.-.- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----
----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----
----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----
----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----
----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----
----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----
----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- -----
----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- ----- .---- ..... -.-.
--- -- .--. .- - .. -... .. .-.. .. - -.-- ..-. --- .-. .--. .-. --- .--- . -.-. - -.-- .- --.. -.-. ---
-. ..-. .. .-. -- . -.. -... . --. .. -. --. . -. . - .. -.-. ... -.-- -. -.-. .... .-. --- -. .. --.. .-
- .. --- -. .--. .-. --- -.-. . ... -.-- . ... -.-- -. -.-. .... .-. --- -. .. --.. .- - .. --- -.
.--. .-. --- --. .-. . ...-- --... . ... - .. -- .- - . -.. - .. -- . ..-. --- .-. -.-. --- --
.--. .-.. . - .. --- -. ..- -. -.- -. --- .-- -. .-.-.- -.-. ..- .-. .-. . -. - .--. .-. --- --. .-. .
... ...- -- .--. . .-. . -.. -... -.-- .-.. .- -.-. -.- --- ..-. .--. .-. . ... . -. - -- . -. -
.-.-.- -.-. ..- .-. .-. . -. - . -..- .--. . .-. .. -- . -. - .- - .. --- -. .-- .... .. -.-. .... -- .-
-.-- -.-. --- -. - .. -. ..- . - .... . .--. .-. --- -.-. . ... --- ..-. -- . - .- -- --- .-. .--.
.... --- ... . -. -.-. --- -- .--. .-.. . - . .-.-.- .--. --- ... . -... .-.. . -.-. .-
- .- .-.. -.-- ... - ... ..-. --- .-. .--- ..- -- .--. ... - .- .-. - .. -. --. - .... . -.-. --- -- .--.
.-.. . - .. --- -. --- ..-. - .... . --. . -. . - .. -.-. - .-. .- -. ... ..-. --- .-. -- .- - .. --- -.
..-. .-. --- -- .... ..- -- .- -. - --- --. .- .-.. .-. .- .- .-. . -... . .. -. --. .-. . ... . .- .-.
-.-. .... . -.. --..-- --- ..-. .-- .... .. -.-. .... .-. . ..-. .. -. . -- . -. - .. -. - --- --.- ..- ..
-. - . ... -. -.-. . .. .- .--. .-. . .-. . --.- ..- .. .. - . .-.-.- .- -.. -.. .. - .. ---
-. .- .-.. -. --- - . ... .-. ..- -- --- .-. ... .--. . .-. ... . - --- ..-. .- -- .. .-.. .. - .-
.-. -.-- -.-. --- ...- . .-. ..- .--. .-- .. - .... --.. .- .-. -.- --- -. ... -.-. --- --- .--. . .-. .-
- .. --- -. .-. . ...-.. ...- .. -.-. - .- .- -.-. -.-. .. -.. . -. - .-.-.- .-. ..- -- --- .-. ... ---
..-. ..- -. ... - .- -... .-.. . --.- ..- .. -. - . ... -. -.-. . -... .- ... . -.. . .-.. . -- . -.
- -. .- - .. ...- . - --- .. .. .-.. -.-. . .-.. . .-. -. . -... ..- .-.. .- .-.-.- .. -. ...- . ... - ..

--. .- - .. --- -. .. -. - --- - .... -... .-.. --- -.-. -.- . -.. -... -.-- - .... -. -.-. .-.. ..- ... .- .. - -.-- .. -. .. - .. .- - .. ...- . .-.-.- .-.. --- --- -.- .. -. - --- .-. --- ... . -... .-.. . -- . .- -. ... --- ..-. ..-. --- .-. -.-. .. -. --. - ....- . .- ..-. - . .-. -.-. --- -- .--. .-.. . - .. --- -. --- ..-. -.- --- - --- .-. . -..- .--. . .-. .. -- . -. - .-.-.- - .. -- . .. .- -. .. -- .--. . .-. .- - .. ...- . .-.-.- - .... -... --- -.. -.-- -.-. .- -. -. --- - .-.. .- ... - .-.-.- - .... . --. .- .-. -- . -. - -- ..- ... - -... . -.-. .... .- -. --. . -.. ... --- - .... --- ..- .-.. --- ..-. - ....-. --- .-- .. - .... .. -. -- .- -.-- .- - .-.. .- ... - ... . -. . .-.-.-

“**Admiral, please come to the bridge. We’re receiving an all-fleet message. The first we’ve ever received on this ship, in fact!**”

He was silent as he fell into his seat, several *dakika* later.

“Sir, the first part is…a general announcement that the communication and travel blackout’s been lifted on Central Command. The second part is…oh god, *look*—”

Everything he had done. Everything he had worked so hard for. To save the lives that he could.

“Otac. They know. *He knows.*”

“It can’t be, we only just figured it out and they’re half a universe away—!”

It had all been on borrowed time, after all.

“He wants your return to Central Command in one *hafta*, with all of us. Everyone now knows he’s looking and will not hesitate to seek you out if you run.”

He had been living on borrowed time.

“You and I both understand what that means, coming from him. I’ll do what you want me to do, you know that. I'll follow you to the end if that's what you asked me, after everything you've done for me.” Sarışın’s face was stony, emotionless save for severity. “It’s a question of what you plan for everyone *else* on this ship to do. No matter what you decide, you can’t turn back from it, but everyone else...these kids, for everything you asked of them and all they’ve done for the Empire because you brought them here. They respect and love you.”

The clock had finally run out.

"They deserve to hear the truth about what's happening now from your own mouth."

“…Father.” Oğul’s eyes were laced with tears. “She…she’s right. What do we do now? What are you going to do?”

Otac wearily stared at both. He felt as if he’d aged so many yıl in such a short amount of time, while everything fell apart around him.

He had fought, and lost. It was over. It was all over.

“…Oğul.” His tongue was heavy as he spoke what he knew, deep down, to be his final orders. “Call the crew to the bridge. De-activate all permissions prohibiting that from happening. And…Sarışın. Set a preliminary course for Central Command.”

His single yellow eye stared at the stars beyond the bridge's windows. They were numerous, limitless, all set in a dark, silent void. He long ago learned that everything came to an end. Lives, careers, families. Even the universe, one day. And yet he'd hoped. He truly had hoped. He could still imagine the moon of his child's dreams, that which existed under three suns, all shining so many beautiful colors against the black of the night. Long ago he told his child that story. He'd always promised he would one day show him, even on this ship, that place where they could imagine what might have been.

Dreams, however, were in the end, dreams. What was happening around him was reality. Otac knew, he would now never be able to fulfill that single, simple dream with his son. He would never see that moon again.

“It ends with me.”

And his own dream, the GESS *Irem* – the ship of Midshipman Kılıç - was finished.

-SON-

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!